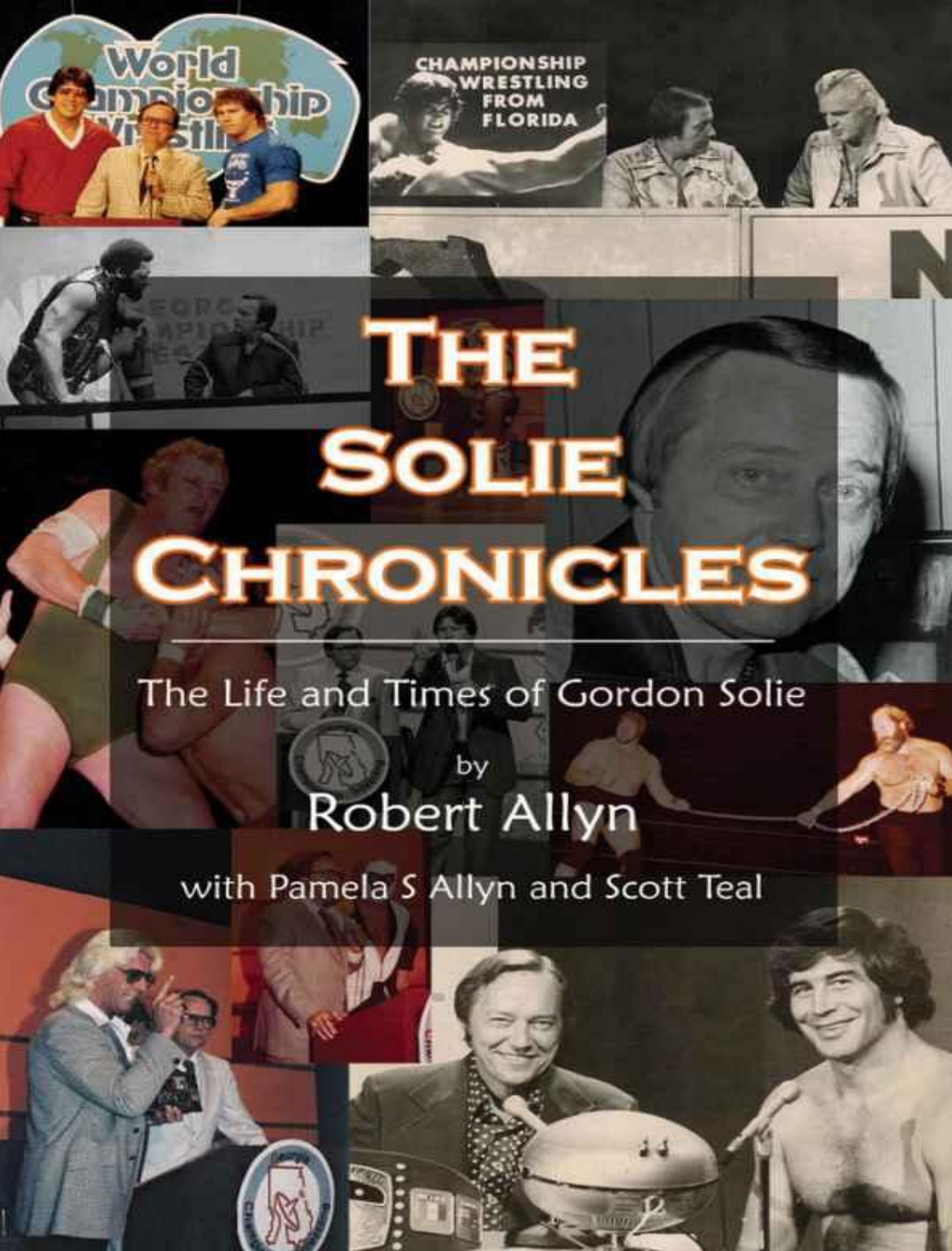

The Solie Chronicles

The Life and Times of Gordon Solie

by

Robert Allyn

with Pamela S Allyn and Scott Teal

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Published by Crowbar Press
106 Tattnall Court
Gallatin, Tennessee.
crowbarpress.com

Book layout by Scott Teal
Cover design by Jameson Allyn
Cover photos from the Gordon Solie Collection, Including photos by Jerry Prater, Scott Teal, Bill Otten and Gene Gordon © by Scooter Leslie
Back cover photo by Jerry Prater

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Solie, Gordon
The Solie Chronicles / by Robert Allyn with Pamela S Allyn and Scott Teal — Kindle ed.
1. Solie, Gordon. 2. Sports—United States—Biography. 3. Wrestling—United States—Biography.
I. Allyn, Robert. II. Title.

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 978-0-9745545-8-7

OTHER BOOKS PUBLISHED BY CROWBAR PRESS INCLUDE:

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Gordon Solie; the best publicity man and announcer in the history of stock car racing on the Florida Suncoast, the host of the top rated show on the largest cable network in America during the early years of cable TV, and the best professional wrestling broadcaster in history.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my wife, Pam, especially for sharing her knowledge of her father's youth and early broadcasting career.

Scott Teal deserves a big "thank you" for sharing his expertise in wrestling history and editing out the "fluff."

Thanks to J Michael Kenyon, who shared some great insight in regards to the content and helped considerably with the proofreading.

A special thank you goes to Chuck Thornton for opening his archives of photos and programs.

I would also like to thank the many people who provided assistance, particularly Abdullah the Butcher, Gene Adler, Jameson Allyn, Pancho Alvarez, Randy Alvarez, Bob Armstrong, Bill Apter, Jack Arnold, Ox Baker, Russ Benedict, Brian Blair, Jack Brisco, Howard Brody, Jeff

Bukantz, Frankie Cain, Will Cagle, Louise Cochran, Buddy Colt, Jim Cornette, Dotty Curtis, J.J. Dillon, Jamie Franklind, Dory Funk Jr., Ron Garvin, Danny Goddard, Skip Gossett, Mike Graham, Stan Hansen, Jimmy "Mouth of the South" Hart, "Crybaby" George Hill, Danny Hodge, Rocky Johnson, Paul Jones, Steve Keirn, Gene Kiniski, Bill Kociaba, Ivan Koloff, "Downtown" Bruno Lauer, Scooter Leslie, John Lindsay, David Marquez, Alex Marvez, Tom McEwen, Billy Mexico, Danny Miller, Keith Mitchell, Mike Mooneyham, Russell Myerson, Bill Newman, Joe Pedicino, Jerry Prater, Harley Race, Dr. Ken Ramey, Buzzie Reutimann, Wayne Reutimann, Cush Revette, Bob Roop, Shannon Rose, Jim Ross, Lance Russell, Bobby Simmons, Jimmy Snuka, Greg Solie, Dick Steinborn, Adrian Street, Gaye Swenson, Donnie Tanner, Rich Tate, Mike Tenay, Joe Turner, Les Thatcher, Bob Vallee, Jack Welch, Roy Welch, C.J. (Jay) West, and Larry Zbyszko.

In regard to photograph usage, thanks to Pam Allyn, Howard Brody, Scott King, Scooter Lesley,

John Lindsay, Bill Otten, Jerry Prater, Adrian Street, and Scott Teal.

FOREWORD

When I began dating my wife, Pam, she told me her father was a television announcer in Florida. I told her, "Wow, that's pretty cool!" Then she said, "He announces professional wrestling." Although I didn't reveal my thoughts at that moment, I must admit that my enthusiasm for his vocation dwindled. I knew and respected amateur wrestlers in high school and college, but my opinion of professional wrestling left something to be desired.

During our honeymoon in Florida, I had a chance to meet Gordon Solie. People rushed up to him on the streets of Tampa and anxiously greeted him with comments like, "Mr. Solie! Mr. Solie! Can I have your autograph? Can I have your autograph?" And yes, Gordon's fans were so excited to run into him in person that they actually repeated themselves, and did so until he graciously accommodated them. Everywhere we went,

Gordon received the red-carpet treatment from local establishments. I thought to myself, “What’s the deal? This guy is a wrestling announcer, right?”

It turned out that he was a big deal; Gordon dressed in expensive contemporary clothing, wore plenty of gold, drove a Mercedes, and owned a beautiful home. He was highly intelligent and cultured in the finer things in life. My curiosity got the better of me, so I decided to further investigate the apparent icon, who also happened to be my new father-in-law. So, I tuned in one day to watch the TV program Championship Wrestling from Florida. To my surprise, I found myself believing everything that came out of Gordon’s mouth as he described the action in the "squared circle." I was hooked. I was a Gordon Solie fan.

Over the months that followed, I learned that Gordon Solie was a man who deserved honors such as "Announcer of the Year," along with accolades for his continued dedication to stock car racing and charitable organizations. I also saw,

however, that his demanding schedule and pre-conceived idea of family life weren't going to win him awards as "Father of the Year" or "Husband of the Year."

The latter characteristics, however, had less and less of an impact on our relationship as the years passed by. Gordon's individual strengths or weaknesses didn't really matter to me. I was drawn to him like millions and millions of people before me. I felt fortunate to have known him and to be associated with a man who possessed some rare gifts ... gifts that even Gordon eventually realized were from God himself.

Millions of adoring fans responded to those gifts as they faithfully watched Gordon on television week-in and week-out for years and years. His numbers were staggering. In 1976, during one of the program's peak years, an estimated 5,000,000 people watched him every week on Championship Wrestling from Florida. That was an incredible viewing audience for a regionally syndicated

show. Five years later, Lee Beasley reported in the Atlanta Weekly that an additional 10,000,000 people saw Gordon every week on two nationally syndicated programs, Georgia Championship Wrestling and The Best of Georgia Championship Wrestling. Twenty-eight years have passed, and television shows with 5,000,000 viewers still find their way onto the "Nielson Overnight TV Show Ratings."

Before you are the tales of a man who made mind-blowing, pioneer-style contributions to the world of sports entertainment — Gordon Solie.

-- Robert Allyn

A NOTE FROM GORDON'S DAUGHTER

After my father passed away, I was left with a feeling of emptiness in my soul. I found solace as I read his numerous papers and writings during the ensuing years. Upon completion of our first book, Gordon Solie: Something Left Behind, I was able to perceive my dad as a fellow human being, and not just an authority figure. It was an epiphany!

Dad's world was always a mystery to many, including those in his own family. Locked inside his 5-foot, 9-inch slender and somewhat-boney frame was a truly gifted and complex human being. However, that exceptionality served as a shield for his real emotions. As I studied and pondered his life of 71 years, I was able to observe many facets of his being, both positive and negative, and garner a deeper understanding of who I am. Some aspects were obvious, while others were veiled to shelter

those he loved from his celebrity status. I will fondly remember my dad's amazing stories and his smiling blue eyes, accompanied by a reassuring wink that everything would be all right. In the midst of Dad's constant teaching was one lesson in particular that touched me the most: the understanding of unconditional love.

As a little girl, I was very close to my dad, and I loved sharing my daily adventures with him. I couldn't wait for his return home from work or long travels on the road. I vividly remember lying in bed at night, trying to stay awake, so that I might hear his car as it pulled into the driveway. Ever so quietly, I would sneak out of my bedroom, just to give him a good night hug and a kiss on the cheek. Those times were filled with splendid stories and gifts from afar: a turquoise-colored jacket, ornately decorated with scenes from the Southwest, porcelain Palomino horses, or fancy bracelets from cities I only knew from a map. During the days when Dad was home before bedtime, or wasn't scheduled to work, he read to me on a regular

basis and nurtured my love of reading. Other times, we went from words on pages to live stock car races and local wrestling matches as I willingly tagged along to some of his broadcasts.

Not normally a patient person, Dad sat good-naturedly through impromptu tea parties, alongside my favorite stuffed animals, and applauded my early baking efforts of the slightly over done "Daddy Cakes," served by a little girl covered with flour and frosting. He always made sure our time together, however limited, was quality time.

Unfortunately, my parents' bitter divorce changed all that and placed an unnecessary burden on me. I became a pawn in adult disagreements. No longer was I permitted to be Daddy's little girl. Instead, I became a Sunday visitation. Our time together was diminished by threats and angry voices. Personally, I was relieved when the divorce was finalized because the household fights between my parents stopped. Then I simply had to deal with the residual effects of being a child of a

divorce. I learned to sit on the fence. I learned to not give out too much information to one parent about the other. I learned that interrogations were brutal. For some time, it was more than just the loss of my parents' marriage. I lost myself … and I sorely missed my dad.

My mother remarried and, thankfully, the Lord, always present, placed a wonderful man in my life as a stepfather. His name was Raymond C. Locke, and in many ways, like my dad; he was always there to listen, and give his logical opinion cloaked with unconditional love. I am blessed to have had him in my life.

At first, contact with my dad was frequent with phone calls and weekly letter writing campaigns. I anxiously awaited his return letters. My letters to Dad were mailed with prior approval from my mother, and then suddenly, the letters from Dad just stopped. He later revealed that he never stopped writing or caring. I can only assume that our letters were intercepted at one end or the other.

Dad remarried, changed his name, and I became part of a past life. Being my father's daughter, I didn't give up. I still wrote the letters, but I was older and a bit wiser. I sent the letters to the television stations. He was greatly surprised and saddened to find a letter with the beginning salutation of "Dear Dad" in with his fan mail. As time passed, we began to talk more often on the phone and enjoyed many long, non-stop-talking lunches and dinners together.

I feel quite fortunate that while we were operating under everyone else's rules of engagement and agendas, my dad and I never really lost that closeness of a father/daughter relationship. During the last two years of his life, I was deeply distressed, and yet grateful, at being able to not only care for him, but to share that time with him. Those days were precious to both of us. Dad called them bittersweet. It was a time of healing, learning, and most importantly, becoming friends with each other on an adult level. For all of this, we were very thankful, and we made sure our

times were moments to remember and cherish.

Out of respect for my dad, I heeded the advice of his mentor, Tom McEwen, the retired and renowned sports editor of the Tampa Tribune. In regard to a biography on my dad, Tom said, "Tell the good with the bad." So ... without further interruption, I present the good, the bad, the sad, and the humorous chapters of my dad's adventures in life.

I remain, respectively yours,
-- Pamela S Allyn

Chapter 1: Loving, Hating, and the FBI

Gordon in his military uniform

In 1947, a class prophecy proclaimed that Jonard Sjoblom (pronounced "juh-NARD" "SHOW-blum") would be widely heard as a NBC mediator for radio-aired round table discussions. As the graduating class of Southwest High School in Minneapolis, Minnesota, peered into an imaginary crystal ball, they made predictions for future lives. One of 39 students graduating that January, Jonard was well known among his classmates for his pragmatic, yet colorful, use of words, a love of a good debate, acting, and politics. Graduation grew nearer and the Class Will didn't list Jonard as leaving anything to an underclass member. With nothing left behind and only the future ahead of him, Jonard Sjoblom would soon become a man of his own creation: Gordon T. Solie.

As an only child with parents of Norwegian-German-Polish heritage, Jonard arrived in the world at 11:20 p.m. on a Saturday evening in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The name on the birth certificate, however, was not Jonard Sjoblom, nor was it Gordon T. Solie. The Minneapolis hospital

document displayed the name "Jonard Frank Labiak," and it was dated on January 26, 1929.

The United States was heading into what would be called the "Great Depression," Calvin Coolidge was the President of the United States, and Babe Ruth was King of baseball. The outside temperature that day read a high of -4 and a low of -21. "A little bundle of joy arriving on a cold winter night" was the phrase used by his mother to describe Jonard's entrance into the world. His mother, Luella, was a tall, genteel, brown-haired beauty, graced with a picturesque smile. A handsome man of short stature, his father, Frank, had an uncanny ability with a pool stick that earned him a streetwise education and undeniable charm.

In 1891, Frank's parents, Francizek and Katherina Labiak or LaBak/Labijak (records contain the various spellings from their homeland in Poznan, Poland) began their journey to the United States from the area of Stettin, Germany in Eastern Europe. Stettin, a seaport 78 miles north,

northeast of Berlin in old East Germany, would later become part of Poland and renamed Szczecin. Tales passed down portrayed their Polish and German ancestors as the serfs, hunters, guards and the militant Kazaki: the Cossacks. Maybe it was the scent of the sea, or a new life across the Atlantic Ocean, which prompted Francizek to take his wife and young son, Andreas, later known as Andrew, to America. Their travels took them to New York, Chicago, Illinois, and on to Minnesota, where Katherina gave birth to thirteen more children. Frank George Labiak/LaBak was the third youngest out of the ten siblings that survived.

The patriarch of Luella's family was Hans Larson, of Storhamar, Hedmark in Norway. He arrived in the United States around 1860, settling in the Shelly area of northwestern Minnesota. After his arrival, Hans Larson realized there were a vast number of families carrying the surname of Larson. Family stories passed down tell of Hans' decision to change the family's last name to one that would remind the family of their love of the land and the

farmstead back in Norway. He chose the Norwegian word for farm; "gård." The newly chosen surname, pronounced "Gaarden," would evolve into "Gordon." Hans Larson Gordon and his wife, Kjersti, were the parents of eleven children. Those children became civic leaders, business owners, and farmers in the areas of Shevlin, Moorhead, and Ada, Minnesota.

During the same era, the 1860s, a handful of men by the last name of Solie left Norway to settle in the open prairies of Wisconsin, Minnesota, and North Dakota. On July 4, 1891, the two clans came together in the United States to celebrate the marriage of Oscar N. Solie to Caroline Gordon, the granddaughter of Hans Larson Gordon. Oscar and Caroline's family grew to include twelve children, with the eighth child, a daughter, carrying the name of Luella Adeline Solie. In the ensuing years, Oscar and Caroline's early demise would leave their surviving children alone. Arduous times ensued as they depended on each other for financial and emotional support. The small-town

atmosphere of northwestern Minnesota eventually lost its appeal for young Luella. With her sights on a nursing career, Luella moved to Minneapolis. Upon her arrival, employment plans changed when her graceful and beautiful looks landed her a sales position at a large Minneapolis department store.

It was in Minneapolis where 19-year-old Luella fell in love and wed a 22-year-old man named Frank Labiak. Within three years, the new family grew by one with the birth of their only child. To the delight of his father, blue-eyed and fair-haired, Jonard Frank Labiak was referred to as "Jonard," and his mother affectionately called him, "Josie." Frank loved the game of baseball, and two of his favorite players were twin brothers, Claude and Clarence Jonnard. Claude played alongside Babe Ruth as he pitched in World Series games for the Yankees before later joining the Chicago Cubs. Clarence, known as "Bubber," was a catcher in Chicago, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia. Unfortunately, the sport so revered by Frank would be something he would never share with his son

Jonard.

While Frank exhibited numerous good qualities, his excessive drinking overshadowed his marriage and family life. As a result, a bitter divorce ensued and was finalized on April 17, 1931. All that remained were a few photos of two people once in love, a two-year-old boy nicknamed Josie, and many unanswered questions. His parents' emotional divorce created a valley of emptiness in the little boy. Eventually, that deep, lonely void would become a constant driving force, both good and bad, for the rest of his life. Jonard would never know that his father, Frank, was actually in an asylum for treatment of his alcoholism.

Fortunately for Jonard, his mother not only possessed strong maternal instincts, she also had practical experience with children. When Luella's parents died, she and her older brother, Floyd, took on the responsibility of caring for the younger children in the family. Those experiences helped Luella as she dealt with the challenges of being a

single mother in the 1930s. Divorce was frowned upon at the time, and the United States was trying to recover financially from the Great Depression. Determined to succeed, Luella took Jonard and moved to Duluth, Minnesota. In an attempt to further distance herself and her son from her ex-husband, Luella referred to her son as “Francis," rather than Jonard. In Duluth, she found work as a cosmetics clerk for Dayton’s Department Store, along with some part-time modeling. A neighboring couple named Smith befriended her and looked after Jonard so Luella could remain employed.

Occasionally, Luella took Jonard to visit her mother’s relatives in Shevlin, Minnesota. Visits with Frank’s side of the family were limited to aging grandparents. No known photos exist showing Jonard with his birth father. He simply vanished from Jonard’s life and memory.

Luella and Jonard also spent weekends with a friend of the family who owned a farm on the

outskirts of Duluth. The lady farmer was affectionately called "Aunt Vivian." During the weekends in the country, Jonard became fascinated with the farm creatures and developed a fondness for animals. That grew to a general love of animals, a love that would endure throughout Jonard's lifetime. Other times, Jonard just ran free in the rural open spaces; close enough for his mom to watch, but far enough away for her to put her feet up and relax on the farmhouse porch. It also was comforting for Luella to have another caring adult around. Aunt Vivian was very patient with Jonard as he demonstrated all the challenges of a boy experiencing the "terrible twos."

In the late summer of 1931, during a fishing trip with family and friends, Jonard's sense of adventure almost resulted in a tragedy. Curiosity led the little boy much too close to the water and away from his mother's ever watchful eyes. He fell from the dock into the numbing cold waters of Lake Superior. The adults heard the panicked screams of a child in trouble. The little boy couldn't swim! As

they rushed towards the dock, a stranger appeared out of nowhere and rescued the frightened two-year-old. The stranger disappeared as quickly as he arrived. No one had a chance to say thank you. Jonard's mother told him that some people were blessed to have angels guarding them, just like the mysterious man at the lake.

Upon their return to Duluth, a new person entered their lives. His name was Pierre Axel Sjoblom, a self-made man who owned a successful insurance agency, representing carriers like Travelers and Lloyd's of London. Pierre was older in comparison to Luella, but that didn't stop the two from falling in love. Luella accepted Pierre's marriage proposal and Jonard had a new step-father. The new family decided to live in Minneapolis. In the city where one life had ended, a new one was about to begin.

The red brick house on South Ewing in Minneapolis was a new beginning in an old world. Just like the many fairy tales read to him by his

mother, Jonard felt that life would be wonderful and everyone would live happily ever after, except ... along with a new father and a new house, there would be a new set of rules. The little boy learned to respect the tall, cigar-smoking man and regard him as his "Dad." They were now the Sjoblom family. They lived in a fine home, wore stylish clothes, drove the latest model car, and attended church every Sunday. They were living the perfect life. Luella suddenly had the freedom and the resources to pursue all kinds of opportunities for her son. She schooled Jonard in the art of proper social graces, creating a perfect "little" gentleman. On one occasion, Luella responded to an ad from Bernstein's Furniture Store in Minneapolis. The ad claimed that a new technology made it possible to record anyone's voice and transfer the voice to a lasting form. Luella reserved one of the new "Speak-O-Phones" for home use and three-and-half-year-old Jonard was officially introduced to the microphone. His mother watched proudly as the smiling, well-mannered little boy stood tall and recited his favorite stories from memory. Not only

did Jonard Frank Labiak make his social debut, but a love affair between Jonard and the microphone began, one that would last a lifetime, and then some.

On January 26, 1935, another extremely cold Minneapolis day, Jonard woke up early. He was excited! He was six years old! He jumped out of bed and ran toward his parents' bedroom. Pierre was in the bathroom shaving and Jonard heard, "Happy birthday, Jonard!"

Jonard eagerly asked, "Where's mom?" It was a tender moment as Pierre explained that Luella was in the hospital and was going to bring home a baby sister for Jonard. Twenty-one days later, little sister Gaye arrived at home and received a warm welcome from her six-year-old "big" brother, Jonard.

Jonard loved his "little" sister from day one and became her protector. When Gaye was upset and pounded on his arms, he would remain patient and

gentle with her. As she grew, Gaye wanted more and more to be included in Jonard's activities. When he played army with his buddies, Jonard would find some way for Gaye to participate. He found just the job for her and named her "the official nurse" for the wounded metal soldiers. It was a strong bond between brother and sister, one that Jonard needed, especially since he had been gradually realizing that the "fairy tale" bond with his stepfather wasn't really a fairy tale after all. The relationship with his stepfather seemed to be deteriorating.

Over the next few years, life in their house changed dramatically. Jonard began asking about his birth father. "Who is he?" "Where is he?" "Does he know where I am?" "What does he look like?" Too many questions! Those questions were quelled by his mother's stories of abandonment and problems she said he was too young to understand. In Jonard's mind, the word "abandonment" meant being left behind, like the lonely, little puppy down at the corner store. How

could anyone forget their child? What did he do that was so bad that would make his father leave him? He heard his mother and step dad talk when they thought he was out of earshot of the conversation. The message was perfectly clear, especially when they argued about Jonard. There was hurt and fear in his mother's voice. Whoever his birth father was, he certainly didn't want anything to do with him. Or did he? He had a "Dad." He didn't need another one … or did he? The puzzled child was told to remember that it was the father who was raising him that counted, not who the birth father was. In 1937, a decision was made with eight-year-old Jonard's best interest in mind. Adoption papers were filed to change his name. The only legal tie to his birth father vanished as the judge declared he was officially to be known as Jonard Pierre Sjoblom, son of Pierre and Luella Sjoblom.

The uncertainty about his birth father continued, but it wasn't Jonard's only concern with his new family. He had witnessed two distinct sides to

Pierre. As much as Jonard loved and respected Pierre, another part of Jonard began to despise the man. When they wrestled, it always began as fun, just a boy and his dad horsing around. It normally ended, though, with Jonard in terrible pain, and with marks on his body to prove it. The only person he could reach out to for comfort was his mother, but Jonard didn't like putting his mom in that position. When Pierre was nice to Jonard, he was really nice. When he wasn't, he was just plain cruel.

During this time, a brown-and-white Brittany spaniel named Colonel sprang into his life. The bond that existed between the spunky spaniel and Jonard epitomized a boy and dog together as one. They shared an unconditional love for one another. Colonel ran in the wind with his ears flapping alongside of his head, and Jonard would follow him around in the yard. When Jonard felt all alone, Colonel would snuggle up to him as if to say, "I'm here." The only thing the dog asked in return was a hug or pat on the head. The boy and his buddy

were inseparable.

Jonard had a trusted companion with his new pet, but he still needed another avenue of escape. He turned to books and allowed his imagination to carry him far away to places where he felt safe. From there, Jonard made up his own stories and acted out the cast of players. Someday he would write stories. "Someday," he thought, "he would be a part of a story … someday."

Animal stories were some of his favorites, especially dog stories. Real Tales of Real Dogs, written by Albert Payson Terhune, vividly told stories of heroic animals and their service of love to their human counterparts. The penned words were reflected by pencil drawings found throughout the book. Jonard read and re-read stories like Aeroplane, The Dog Who Turned Wolf, and Roger, the Church-Going Bloodhound, until he could retell each tale from memory.

The animal stories took second place, however,

if there was a new book about air heroes. Jonard learned about the brave deeds of flyers in World War I, and later continued his interest as the United States went through World War II. There were thrilling stories about ace fighter pilots who had that extra dash of glamour and excitement in their lives. They were the risk takers, like Captain Eddie Rickenbacker, Raoul Lufbery, and Francis "Gabby" Gabreski. Jonard imagined himself at the controls of a machine that could defy earthly forces and propel him into the air, flying higher and higher, and faster and faster. There he could perform power dives, loops, figure eights, and all the other maneuvers of a fighter pilot. Someday he would do just that! Yes, indeed!

Attraction to the "bigger than life characters" pointed Jonard in the direction of comic books. In the late 1930s, characters in comic books were endowed with super powers, elevated degrees of human conscience, and a sense of humor needed to fight the forces of evil. All were known by descriptive names, such as the Shadow, Superman,

Batman, Human Torch, The Shield, Captain America, Captain Marvel, and Wonder Woman. While the good powers generally prevailed, evil's threatening presence loomed in the sky like an approaching storm. Evil leaders could not fight the good guys without brainwashed support, so the battles became uneven tag team matches. On occasion, Jonard got so wrapped up in the land of superheroes that he lost track of time.

One afternoon, as Jonard lay on the porch, deeply engrossed in reading about super heroes, he was interrupted by the stern voice of Pierre, "Have you finished your chores?"

Without lifting his eyes from the story, Jonard answered in a somewhat impatient sighing voice, "No, but I will."

Pierre stormed into the house, returned angrily, and grabbed the comic books away from Jonard. After heaving the comic books onto the ground in the back yard, Pierre poured lighter fluid on them

and set them on fire. Nothing else needed to be said. Jonard felt angry and hurt as he watched his adventure collection go up in flames. Pierre went back to the house and said something to Luella about "your son." It was another jab that Jonard did not want or need to hear.

As he worked on his chores, Jonard began to think about how to replace his comic books without his old man finding out. He was getting an allowance of 75-cents a week, but 50-cents of that automatically went into the bank toward the purchase of a new bike. A new comic book cost 10-cents, so Jonard scrambled to earn a little extra coin. One by one, he replaced the comic books. Cleverly, he placed the books in a large cigar box (which belonged to his dad) and buried the box in the next door neighbor's back yard. When Jonard wanted to read them, he took the box and climbed up into the neighbor's tree, positioning himself so he could keep out an eye for Pierre.

The 50-cents a week automatically deducted

from Jonard's allowance was based on a previous conversation with Pierre. Jonard really wanted a new Silver King bicycle. It was made from aluminum and stainless steel, and represented the ultimate in the two-wheeled kingdom. His best friend, Lennie, already had one. At the time, Pierre added some extra chores and told Jonard that he could buy the Sears and Roebuck bike in 36 weeks. By then, Jonard would have $18 to cover the $17.95 required for the purchase.

Later in the fall, as Jonard put the finishing touches on his Saturday chores, Pierre came home and parked the Packard 120 in the driveway. Pierre got out and, as usual, came over to inspect Jonard's work. As Pierre approached, Jonard wondered if it was Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde heading his way. To his surprise, Pierre spoke in a gentle voice and said, "Would you like to watch Minnesota play Wisconsin next Saturday at the football stadium?" Jonard's big smile was an obvious answer of yes! Pierre continued, "Well, if you want to go, you'll have to be done with the

lawn and everything else by the time I'm ready to go."

The next Saturday, Jonard got an early start and completed his chores just as his dad returned home. His dad was more particular than ever as he examined the trimmed yard. Jonard thought he had done a superb job on the yard, and proudly showed off his morning's work. After several minutes of dead silence, Pierre muttered, "I'll accept this." The outcome of the game was of little significance because Jonard witnessed a good side of his father that he hadn't seen before. Together, they were standing on a level playing field and simply sharing the love of a sport. Jonard was overwhelmed by all the nice greetings his dad received from a large number of successful-looking men. The pleasantries were amazing as Pierre introduced Jonard to a slew of high-class football fans.

Impressed by Pierre's extensive knowledge of college football, Jonard was beaming with pride

as he and his dad walked out of the stadium. A few minutes later, when Pierre drove out of the parking lot, the happy atmosphere disappeared as Jonard again witnessed his dad's violent temper. In today's world, it's called road rage. Pierre screamed at drivers if they didn't move off the lot fast enough, or if they didn't recognize him, or whatever. As they left the crowded traffic of the stadium, Jonard was surprised by a complete attitude change when Pierre turned to him and calmly asked, "How much money do you have saved for your bike?"

"Sixteen dollars," replied Jonard.

"And how long have you been saving?" inquired Pierre.

"Thirty-two weeks," answered Jonard.

"Well, it won't be long now until you have enough saved for your bike, will it?" asked his dad.

"No, sir," said Jonard.

"I must say I'm a little disappointed that you haven't saved a little more of your work money for the bike if you wanted it so badly," remarked Pierre. Of course, Jonard did not talk about the funds he used to replace his comic book collection.

As they were driving home, Pierre commented, "I have to stop here for a minute to see a man about some insurance," and he swung the car into a parking space at a B.F. Goodrich store. Once inside, Pierre let Jonard look at some bicycles while he took care of business. After ten minutes passed, Pierre came over to Jonard. "See any bikes you like?"

Jonard cautiously answered his dad, "Yes, this one." It was a two-wheeler with a sticker price of $22.95 and Jonard had already come to the surprise conclusion that the big, gruff, frightening man was actually going to put up the rest of the money for a bike. "Harry, come here for a minute,"

bellowed out Pierre.

"Harry, the boy likes this bike, what do you think?" Harry said, "It is a good bike but if I had my choice, I would take this one with knee action, the horn, the lights, and the basket." Jonard obviously wanted that one, too, but it was $54, which was an astronomical price for a bicycle in those days. "Okay Harry, put it in the car," stated Pierre. Jonard could not possibly express his feelings at that moment. He was in shock!

The drive home was occupied with business talk as Pierre began the conversation, "Well, let me see. You have sixteen dollars, and the bike was fifty-four dollars. Are you willing to pay me fifty cents a week until the bike is paid for?"

A no-brainer response came from his son, "Yes, sir!"

"Remember," Pierre stated, "that will be another seventy-two weeks of mowing the lawn."

Ten weeks went by, and each week, Pierre took a quarter out of his pocket and gave it to Jonard with the balance of the allowance applied the bicycle debt. The bike was sitting in the garage inactive by then because of the winter snow. After Jonard finished shoveling snow from the driveway and sidewalks, his dad called him inside for a progress report. Upon hearing the report that Jonard had paid off $21 and had only $33 to go, Pierre said, "Don’t forget the interest!" He smiled and handed Jonard a passbook from the Farmers and Mechanics Bank in downtown Minneapolis. It was a nice surprise for Jonard to see his name atop the register and $21 listed on the deposit side of the ledger. Once again, Pierre said, "Don’t forget the interest!" It took some years for Jonard to fully understand the lesson from Pierre.

Early on, Jonard demonstrated that he wasn’t the typical youngster with dreams of being a fireman, policeman, or baseball player. His interest focused on a wooden box called a radio. Around the time Jonard was ten years old, the media consisted of

the daily newspaper, radio, and movie theaters. Television was still in the experimental stage. Newspapers told yesterday's news, and movies told stories, but radio delivered important bulletins immediately. Eight out of every ten homes had a radio, and most cars included one. Americans listened intently to comedy, sports, drama shows, musical programs, world news, up to date gossip from Walter Winchell, and, on occasion, the President of the United States. Evenings in the Sjoblom household were shared with the broadcasts of The Lone Ranger, Fibber McGee and Molly, The Shadow, Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy, Abbott and Costello, Sky King, Bing Crosby's The Cremo Singer (sponsored by Cremo Cigars), and Edward R. Murrow.

Sporting events sent over the radio air waves, like baseball, boxing, and college football, immediately caught Jonard's attention. His mom praised him as Jonard announced his own version of a game or a news report. She knew he had talent, and fondly remembered his storytelling

ability going back to when he was only four years old. He told her he wanted to become a radio broadcaster. No! More than that … a storyteller! He wanted to be someone who made words come to life. Jonard could see himself seated at a microphone with his voice going out to millions of people across the world. It was a never-ending dream.

While most radio programs were meant to entertain, the radio also brought the front lines of war closer to home. Americans faced a cultural change with the United States involved in World War II, and the frequent question asked of all Americans was "What did you do today for freedom?" Patriotism was booming! Aiding Uncle Sam in the war effort became a family affair. In that same year, more than 151,000 men, women and children in the Minneapolis area were trained to serve in case an emergency should strike their city.

Pierre served as a neighborhood air warden,

while Luella became a Victory Aide. Luella's eldest brother, Arthur Thomas Solie, served in World War I with the American Expeditionary Forces as an infantryman under General John J. "Black Jack" Pershing's command. Arthur and his two younger brothers, Lyle and Floyd, enlisted together. Like many of the young men fighting for the freedom of others, Arthur never returned home. Two months after arriving in France, Arthur, along with more than 2,000 soldiers, died in the battle at St. Mihiel. His remains are buried in the St. Mihiel American cemetery outside of Thiaucourt, France.

Groomed by her parents in civic responsibility, Luella spoke out on the roles of women in the fight for freedom. When the State Guard, WACS and WAVES needed recruits, Luella volunteered her time as a recruiter or lecturer to civic groups on the effects of smallpox. When the economy felt the costly effects of war, she distributed government pamphlets addressing exactly why point rationing of goods was necessary for a nation at war. Like a guiding light, she appealed to teachers and nurses

to go back to work and further support the national effort to maintain freedom.

At home, she oversaw the family's vegetable garden. Like many Americans, Luella supported the "Gardens for Victory," a national project during the war years. Everybody helped in funding World War II by recycling, conserving raw materials, and buying war bonds. Jonard, like many other youngsters, gathered aluminum, iron, steel scrap, copper, bronze, rubber, and bags of rags for the war effort.

The gardening project's purpose was to draw neighbors closer to one another, promoting a sense of community by sharing the harvest. Any leftover produce or collected supplies were shipped around the United States. Luella relished working in her garden, canning tomatoes and green beans, along with providing fresh produce for family and friends. Acting as his mother's first assistant, Jonard was responsible for a portion of weeding, cultivating, and spading the garden, and he

appointed Gaye as his assistant. The Sjoblom family's "Garden for Victory" was featured in Northwest Lives, a monthly magazine in the Minneapolis area.

A woman of character, grace and class, Luella reminded her children daily about proper table manners, place-setting, and posture. Her passion for reading also was passed on to both Jonard and Gaye. When she was not busy raising her children, Luella excelled as a hostess. Her elegant dinner parties were a work of art. She held teas, attended Eastern Star meetings and study groups, played bridge, and remained active for her Lutheran Church charity events. To say that Luella was in her element on the holidays would be an understatement. Her warmth was felt by all who came in contact with her during the Thanksgiving and Christmas seasons. At Christmastime, Luella's decorations were visible in every room as she dressed the entire house for the celebration. The holidays seemed to give her a peaceful feeling, much like the visits to the farm in Duluth. She

seemed the happiest during that time, a time when the family became a family again for it was a time of peace … at least for a while.

Despite his mother's cultural nurturing and his dad's behavioral standards, Jonard began to show signs of revolt for some rules, mostly his dad's. Sometimes, it was merely adolescent common sense, or lack thereof, but there were instances when he deliberately irritated his dad. He wanted to see just how far he could push the old man. He smoked his first cigarette in the basement of his parents' house at the age of twelve. After hiding his new habit for a while, Jonard walked past his mother in the kitchen one day and permeated the air with the odor of a smoked cigarette. She asked and he didn't lie. She wanted to know why and he told her: "No real reason. I just wanted to try them." He promised he would never smoke again.

One night, while babysitting for his sister, Jonard decided he wanted to see a movie. His parents weren't due back at home until eleven o'clock at

night, so Jonard knew he'd have to be back by ten o'clock to be on the safe side. He also knew he was not supposed to leave the house that night. That was a strict order from his dad. Regardless, as soon as Gaye was asleep, Jonard took off and headed to the movie theater. After the feature film concluded, he made a beeline for home.

Arriving just before ten, Jonard unexpectedly found the front door locked. A search of his pockets came up empty. His sister Gaye was asleep in her upstairs bedroom. Panic began to set in on how to get back into the house without a key. Banging on the door would have alerted his neighbors, who would subsequently switch on their front porch lights and peer out the windows. His old man would … no, he couldn't and wouldn't think about that. Jonard's heart was beating faster and faster and he thought to himself, "Now this is a real switch. Normally, I'm trying to get out of the house!" He thought about getting a ladder, but suddenly remembered that his dad's ladder was locked away. He didn't dare go ask a neighbor!

Forget the ladder! With his panic on pause for a moment, he scanned the jagged bricks on the backside of the house. Suddenly, speaking out very loudly to himself, he said, "That's it! I can climb the bricks!" There was just enough space between the jagged bricks for his feet and fingers. For once, being skinny with slender feet and thin fingers would work to his advantage. He set his sights on an open porch leading to the second floor and his parent's bedroom. He knew if he scaled the bricks to the porch, he could knock softly, but loud enough to wake his sister. If she opened the door, his parents would never know. Like a superhero from one of his comic books, he scaled the bricks to the upper porch. As he gently banged on the door, he called Gaye's name. He heard the door unlock! As the door opened, there stood sleepy-eyed Gaye looking at her disheveled brother. Gently, he walked her back to her room. As he walked out of her bedroom, he whispered, "Thanks, Gaye." His parents never did know about that night.

No such luck at school. Jonard wasn't ill-

behaved. He just became mischievous because he was bored. He was highly intelligent, but he appeared to be just an average student who liked to daydream. When he wasn't daydreaming, he was talking. He promised he would do better. Only one of his parents believed him. Although it took an effort to constantly behave at school, Jonard decided that was his best course of action. After all, he had enough problems at home.

Despite the lack of any great academic achievements in junior high, Jonard entered an experimental high school in Minneapolis. Southwest High School was different than most American schools in the 1940s because it gave students a choice of classes geared toward specific careers, in lieu of the traditional general education courses. Interestingly enough, one of the choices offered was radio. It was childhood dream come true for Jonard. Finally, in his eyes, school had a purpose.

High school also offered teenage boys a chance

to play organized sports. No matter how much Jonard tried, he knew he wasn't cut out to be an athlete. He was a short, skinny kid who just loved sports. While he was just another body for games of sandlot baseball and football, it was evident to the whole neighborhood that Jonard was exceptional at performing on a bicycle!

His favorite pastime was playing pool. The forbidden pool hall, with its air layered in rippling gray smoke, the distinctive sound of pool balls hitting against one another, and the smell of alcohol on the patrons' breath was definitely outside the boundaries set by his parents. Jonard was pretty good with a cue stick, so he checked out the local hall looking for some competition. He wasn't there to get into trouble, just to have a good time, hang out, play a little pool, run his mouth with the guys, and act like a tough guy. He had heard the awful stories about his birth father being a pool hustler, but thought, "He must have been a decent player if they called him a hustler." Sometimes, he scanned the crowd, hoping to see a face like his own,

always looking, listening, and learning.

Jonard thought cars were pretty cool, too. Like most male teens, Jonard dreamed about owning a car and all the normal benefits; freedom, girls, speed, girls, power, and more girls! His old man's car was nice, but Jonard wanted the status offered by wheels he could call his own. Hanging out at the local auto races was as close as he would get to a car of any kind, especially a fast car. The loud roar of finely tuned engines of the sprint cars held its own mystique for Jonard; a risk and a danger. While waiting for his car ownership days to arrive, Jonard learned how to ride a motorcycle, and even snagged himself a fine girlfriend named Barbara. He imagined taking off down the road, going somewhere with his girl resting her head against his back and hugging him tightly around the waist.

Jonard's sports of choice were definitely not on the Hennepin County School's curriculum calendar. There were no classes for shooting pool

or racing cars, and he definitely wasn't a jock. Instead, he ran the public address system for the school, learning the system inside and out. When local radio stations held drama workshops, he was there. School plays were the best place for Jonard to practice public speaking. He appeared in The Man without a Country, and the senior play, a musical comedy called A Date with Judy, in which he played the father of a teenage girl. On stage, Jonard forgot who he was, and easily slipped into a character's role. He treasured the limelight, yet remained sincerely humble as he accepted the accolades given by his mother and classmates. Jonard always hoped he would hear some kind of praise from Pierre, too. Personally, he constantly questioned whether or not he was really as good as everyone said he was.

That lure of public speaking in assorted drama programs gave rise to another interest — politics. Jonard loved baiting people with totally off-the-wall comments, just to get them to react. Then, depending on their reaction and the topic, he would

take off on either the pros or cons on the subject. He read everything he could lay his hands on to stay informed and prepared. Besides, he enjoyed verbal contests. A good debate was invigorating and entertaining. It was no surprise that Jonard was named campaign manager when classmate John Johnson ran for class president, and together, they pulled off a victory.

Fellow classmates remember Jonard (or by his nickname "Josie") as a well-liked student, a friend to everyone, and the class cut-up. Most of all, they remember his charming smile and those laughing blue-eyes. There was no escaping his undeniable charm as he earned the class title of "Biggest Flirt." Not to be surpassed by his charisma was his gift of gab, which garnered Jonard two listings in his class Hall of Fame: "Best Talker" and the guy with the "Best Line." Years after high school, some of Josie's classmates still reminisced about his incredible speaking voice.

One of Jonard's favorite games was to learn a

new word every day. He said, "If you learn one new word a day, use it correctly, and as often as possible in your conversations, it will become part of your vocabulary forever." Regardless of any positive achievements or praises received by Jonard from others in the community, nothing he did was ever good enough to please Pierre. His dad continued to be overly harsh and critical of his adopted son. There was jealousy, too. Pierre made it clear that he didn't like all the attention Jonard received from his mother. Whenever his dad entered the house or a room, an uneasy feeling stirred deep inside of Jonard. Although he was fearful of the man he called "Dad," he hid those feelings from everyone else. More than anything in the world, he wanted Pierre to love him and not be so intolerable. The statement, "Just remember, you are my adopted son," burned through Jonard deep into his soul. He wondered why Pierre thought it necessary to constantly remind him that he wasn't really his son.

Sixteen years old! Now more than ever, Jonard

wanted to be on his own. It didn't particularly matter where, just away from his old man and all the trappings of trying to be something or somebody he couldn't or didn't want to be. Still dreaming of becoming a pilot, he ran away from home and tried to join the Air Force. The Air Force sent him home just as they received him — a short 16-year-old. He was embarrassed! His dad laughed at him and then sternly reprimanded him. Nobody even asked Jonard why he left.

One day in September 1945, Jonard had enough of unfair rules, one-sided parental expectations, and the frequent explosive arguments with his dad. His mother was caught between her son and her husband. Luella loved both of them, yet she was unable to keep the peace in the family anymore. Her husband was in control, and Jonard found it even more impossible to please his dad. He was convinced that if he left home, maybe his mother's and sister's lives would be happier. Jonard was tired of pretending at school that everything was wonderful. It wasn't! What went on behind closed

doors at home was only known to those in the immediate family, and would remain a secret from friends and associates. A few outsiders had their suspicions, but it no longer mattered to Jonard. No longer could he take the verbal, mental, or physical abuse dealt out by his dad.

So Jonard ran away … again.

Denver, Colorado is roughly 914 miles from the Sjoblom house on Ewing Street in Minneapolis, and Jonard planned to make that his first stop. From there, he would see the world, and he would never look back to Minneapolis. He thought about heading to California after Denver. One thing for sure, he wouldn't go home again. His heart ached when he thought of his sister. She was only 10 years old. Hopefully, someday, she would understand why he had left.

Getting out of Minneapolis was a piece of cake. Hitchhiking was a great way to travel. There were plenty of semi-trucks headed west, and Jonard

could certainly tell a yarn when necessary. Boy, if his mom could see him now! Hitchhiking! His vocabulary and demeanor made him appear older than he was. His parents wouldn't miss him until after school. Before they realized he was gone, there would be some major miles between them. Man, this was easy! Then again, maybe just a little too easy.

Looking for another ride on the highway, he thought, "I could drive myself. After all, I'm a pretty good driver!" Why, back home, when a high-school friend wanted to learn how to drive, her father asked Jonard to give her driving lessons. Yes. He was determined to find some wheels. He could easily hot wire the average car and take off down the nearest highway, and later worry about where he would go.

As Jonard was thumbing his way west, Guy Miller arrived in Denver, Colorado on company business. On the morning of September 6, 1945, he parked the sleek-looking company car in a local

parking area. After attending a business meeting, he returned to an empty parking space. Calmly, he called the Denver police and reported the car as stolen. The car was the property of the Shell Oil Company.

The two-lane highway and the 1940 Buick four-door, touring sedan automobile were made for each other. The engine purred like a kitten as it cruised down the highway. Behind the wheel of the oversized car was an undersized driver with an enlarged ego. The driver had a name: Jonard Sjoblom. He was definitely cool. Yeah, if people could see him now! Traveling west out of Denver, he decided to head toward California. He thought he might just travel all over the country with no real direction. He was just going to drive.

By the time he crossed into the state of Utah, however, his thoughts went back to his mother. In his mind, he could see his mother sobbing and asking herself, "Why did he do this?" His dad would remind her that he was certainly not acting

like any son of his. Jonard just wanted to get as far away as possible. Ahead of him lay an open road lined with exits to a new life somewhere. He had a dream. Nothing, and nobody, was ever going to stand in his way!

What Jonard didn't anticipate was the quickness of the Denver police and the FBI. An All Points Bulletin, or APB, was issued for Miller's stolen car. Outside of Boulder City, near the Boulder Dam, the local police stopped the oversized car with the undersized driver. Arrested on Grand Theft Auto across state lines, Jonard was handcuffed and placed in the back of the squad car. Appearing a lot smaller than his 5'8" frame, he was driven back to Denver to face the law and his parents. Horrified, he envisioned the upcoming scene. He could almost hear them: "You are a criminal, a juvenile delinquent! How could you have done this to us?" At that moment, the last people he wanted to speak to were his parents! There was no way he was going to use his one allowed phone call to speak with his mom and

dad. He needed a buffer, so Jonard decided to phone the pastor of his parent's church and ask him to call his parents.

After the phone call, Jonard was left to sit in a cell at the Denver Juvenile Detention Center. He sat … and he sat. Evidently, his dad was trying to teach him a lesson. The days slipped away slowly. The nights seemed to never end. Right then and right there, Jonard made a promise to himself! No matter what he had to do, never again would anyone find him sitting in a jail cell, waiting for the next meal. Reality really crept in when he was told that his scheduled court date was October 8, 1945, more than a month from his arrest date! He thought to himself, "No matter what, I have to remain calm! Yeah, right. That's why my stomach is doing somersaults, and crazy thoughts are running through my mind! No need to lie to myself. I'm scared. This isn't the Air Force, and they're not sending me home with a smile and a laugh. This is serious! Right now, I have to come up with answers. Answers for questions they will surely ask."

As he sat waiting in the visitor's room, his mother's disappointed, yet concerned face, and his dad's stern comments, kept flashing like neon signs through his mind. Their entrance into the stark, cold room brought him immediately to his feet in respect as his eyes met those of his dad. Whatever his dad had in mind for consequences, Jonard would have bet money that they would be severe.

The October 8 hearing gave a full accounting of the happenings on that day in early September. Pierre Sjoblom made no excuse for Jonard's actions, but he didn't want the boy to end up in jail. Yes, the charges were severe. Yes, something had to be done. After counseling with the attorney, a decision was made. A plea of guilty was entered under violation of the Federal Juvenile Delinquency Act waiving counsel and jury trial. Jonard's dad asked the court to rule for the strictest probationary period. The 16-year-old would remain in custody until the sentencing date, scheduled for October 19 in Denver. On that day, the court sentenced Jonard to three years probation

with standard guidelines of a probation officer, attending church weekly, no more trouble, and orders to stay out of Colorado. His dad asked the court to waive the probationary period if Jonard agreed to enlist in the service under court specified conditions. The court's response was yes, with one condition: if for some reason, Jonard were discharged from the service earlier than 1948, the probationary period would resume. Life would never be the same. Nothing and nobody could erase the events of yesterday.

As they headed back down the highway to Minnesota, Jonard's mind raced with the events of the past few days. The mood in the car was silent and chilly. Jonard thought to himself, "Well, this is one fine mess … and this time nobody is here to unlock the door. I thought I was so-oooh smart!"

The long ride home gave Jonard plenty of agonizing time to think. First, he would finish his probation. That was a given. Next, he would find a way out of Minnesota. His initial silent response to

his dad's suggestion of going into the service was one of anger. But on second thought, that suggestion merited more consideration. For once, maybe the punishment had a positive side. He decided this just might work to his advantage, and it was legal. Joining the military would give him a legitimate way to get out from under his father's control.

The forever-changed relationship with his parents was worse than having to face his friends. He no longer felt like part of the family and he had tarnished their name. He saw the shame in their eyes and disappointment in their voices when they spoke of him. That closed-door conversation between his dad and the judge meant there would be hell to pay for causing his dad such grief and embarrassment. Jonard knew he was going to have to kiss Pierre's ass for a while, probably until he could leave again.

Jonard wondered if his sister, Gaye, knew the story. Hopefully not. With a humble voice, he asked his mother, and her answer was, "No."

Thank goodness, he thought. Gaye looked up to him and he sure didn't want to lose her respect. When his thoughts turned to school, he realized that his grades were a real mess because he had been absent for weeks. Surely his parents contacted the school about his absence. He wondered what his parents had told them. Some thought he had contracted a terrible illness, while others believed he was visiting a girl in Colorado. No matter what the answers, there would be a lot of questions, but more importantly, he had another secret to keep.

Fortunately, someone stepped forward and caught Jonard's attention. On a late fall morning in 1945, a teacher sat down with him for a heart to heart talk. As the teacher spoke, Jonard didn't just hear. He listened. The conversation roughly went as follows: "Don't let your absence ruin your life! You can get caught up on your work. Remember to always look forward and never backward. The past is the past. Learn from it. Believe in yourself. I believe in you. Remember, graduation is right around the corner. "You have a wonderful gift, so

use it! It's your destiny."

Something clicked in Jonard's head that crisp fall morning. Someone was finally listening … someone who believed in him!

Jonard remained on the course dictated by the court system. Determined to catch up with his class and graduate, he refused to accept failure. He kept an agenda, allowing no one to interfere with his goals. As graduation day approached, the road out of Minnesota became clearer. He was surprised when he was asked to present the Benediction to his graduating class. Not only did he feel honored, but he sensed a feeling of some vindication, or forgiveness, especially since his parents were there. At the end of the service, a mother in the audience approached the dapperly dressed, young graduate and asked him where his church was located. Jonard smiled and said, "Thank you, but I'm not a minister." Now that was some kind of a day! Graduation … and a lady mistook him for a minister!

After graduation, Jonard tried to settle down to the life expected of him by his parents: college, a job, getting married, and raising a family. His friends were all moving on with their lives in much the same direction. He wasn't ready for any of those things, and he knew it. In fact, he may never be ready to take on some of those expectations. Remembering his original plan and the conditions of his probation, he considered the University of Minnesota for a brief moment, but quickly rejected the idea. No, he couldn't stay in Minnesota. At his dad's insistence, on January 21, 1946, Jonard applied for enlistment in the United States Navy. The following year in May, he applied for enlistment in the United States Army Air Force. Jonard was assured by his dad that at some time within the near future, either the Air Force or the Navy would be in charge of his life.

On May 29, 1947, his mother's birthday, Jonard finally found a place away from Minnesota. His three-year tour of duty in the Air Force began, returning only to Minneapolis a couple of times

while on leave. At the government's expense, Jonard traveled to different parts of the country, learning not only a job, but doing some soul searching, as well. On one occasion, his interest in broadcasting lured Jonard to the set of a popular radio show in California called "Breakfast in Hollywood." Jack McElroy, a popular Hollywood personality, replaced the program's regular MC (Tom Breneman) as the guest host on the day of Jonard's visit.

When basic training was over, Jonard shipped out with his unit for a 17-month stint in Okinawa, Japan. Trained as a VHF radio technician on P51 Mustang fighter aircraft as part of the 7th Geodetic Squadron, Jonard earned his Sergeant's stripes and worked for the Air Force Radio. The Geodetic Squad was the forerunner of early radar detection systems. His initial dream was to enter the service and learn the trade of encrypting or decoding messages.

Military service was a positive experience for

Jonard as he learned about day-to-day self-discipline and respect for authority. Off duty, he hung out with the guys in his outfit and partied a bit. That was a fairly normal thing to do except, in Jonard's case, the drinking acted as the perfect catalyst to wake up an alcoholic gene that was lying dormant in his 140-pound body. Okinawa also was the place where Jonard first smoked pot, and although marijuana became more of a recreational drug, the young serviceman was headed on a course of heavy alcohol consumption for the rest of his life. However, whether he was on or off duty, sober or buzzed, Jonard seemed to do well with the ladies. By then, he was 5-foot-9½ inches tall, slightly tanned, slender, and had dark, blonde hair. Even though the ladies found him to be an attractive serviceman, Jonard didn't think of himself as a man who looked good in a uniform.

Once back in the United States at Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana, Jonard hooked up with a radio station, WRCN, and it became his life away from the barracks. The involvement at the base

radio station prompted Jonard to continue his search for bigger and better opportunities near a microphone or a broadcast booth. Through the grapevine, he heard about a job at a local station. Horace Logan, Program Director of a local popular CBS radio station, KWKH, was hiring weekend help, and Jonard was hired to work as a page on a part-time basis. As he began his new station duties, primarily running errands, Jonard remembered his dad talking to him about starting at the bottom. The only way to go was up.

Envisioning his chance to one day send his voice over the radio air waves, Jonard repeated to himself, over and over, "This is Jonard Sjoblom, bringing you the evening news." He thought that sounded horrible. His name just didn't roll off the tongue easily, like William L. Shirer, Edward R. Murrow, Eric Sevareid, or even Walter Winchell. Jonard decided he needed a catchy name, one that would be easy to pronounce. More importantly, he needed a professional name with no connection to either the juvenile delinquent who stole a car, or

that "adopted son." He needed a name to call his own. While in the service, his service buddies called him Gordon, or Gordy, the surname from his mother's family tree. He remembered his mother's stories of her parents, especially those about his grandmother, Caroline Gordon Solie. To honor his mother and his grandparents, he combined the two and became "Gordon Solie."

Toward the end of his Barksdale service tour, Gordon went off base with some of his friends during a furlough. During that trip, he met a slender, dark-haired, young woman visiting from Tampa, Florida. Her name was Betty Lee Hutchinson. She was a pretty woman with beautiful blue eyes who was easily attracted to a good-looking guy in a uniform. Besides the hot physical relationship, Gordon said he felt sorry for her because she told him she was pregnant. Three days later, on April 12, 1950, a Justice of the Peace married them in Miller County, Arkansas. Although his name on the marriage license read Jonard P. Sjoblom, his new bride called him Gordon.

Whether Betty lost the child or made up the story, no baby ever made an appearance.

Gordon thought of the different scenarios for breaking the news of the quick marriage to his parents. He decided the occasion wasn't like the last time he shocked them, so he wouldn't call his pastor first. Déjà vu crossed his mind, however, as his fingers dialed their telephone number. Luella was full of questions, the most important of which was "Why?" His dad wanted to know just how Jonard planned to support a wife. "Do you have a job? How long have you known this girl?" Gordon knew where the conversation was heading. In an attempt to be assertive, he began to say that he had everything under control, until the stern voice of his dad interrupted him, offering the new groom a position in Pierre's lucrative insurance business. Oh no! There was nothing that could convince Gordon to return to Minneapolis. Politely, he turned down the offer, all the while thinking, "Nice try." If he ever again traveled those roads, it would be under his terms, not his dad's. Besides; his new

bride had family in Florida.

Chapter 2: Cigars, Strawberries, Ovals and Rings

A young Gordon Solie and George Friend, station manager for WPLA,
look at one of the feature race stock-car trophies at Speedway Park

Tampa, Florida was Gordon's first stop after his honorable discharge from the Air Force in 1950. He had been in Tampa once before when the service took him there, and Gordon planned to make Tampa his new home.

In the 16th century, expeditions led by Spanish explorers Pánfilo de Narváez and Hernando de Soto landed near Tampa in search of gold. After numerous encounters with the powerful Indian tribes in Florida, many of the explorers escaped with only their lives. Settlers moving into the area took advantage of the Tampa Bay waters and utilized them to create a trade gateway for ships from other countries.

As the ships came, so did the cultures from around the world. By 1885, due to its close proximity to Cuba, Tampa had become a major cigar production center. New railroads brought immigrants from Italy, Spain, and Cuba. They, in turn, created a city within a city. Ybor City rose from 40 acres of swamp and became the hub for

cigar factories which would turn out millions of cigars every year. Along with their belongings, the immigrants brought an art handed down from family to family: hand rolled cigars. Lively music, the aroma of fresh baked bread and strong Cuban coffee, old men playing dominoes, and the sweet smell of slow-burning, Havana cigars were the scenes and scents of yesteryear Ybor City.

Along with establishing leadership in the cigar industry, Ybor City developed its own identity in 1922 with the introduction of La Gaceta, the nation's only tri-lingual newspaper, and a small, tri-lingual radio station, WEBK-AM 1590. During its short time on the air, WEBK was the first Tampa Bay area station to broadcast a local talk show devoted to community issues and jazz music of interest to the black community — a weekly 15-minute program hosted by Tampa-area activist and journalist, Norman Jones.

WEBK's primary announcer in 1950 was Tampa native Wayne Fariss, who, in 1955, would become

the first news anchor for television station WTVT Channel 13 when they signed on the air. Fariss later became a legend in Miami, where he anchored the six and eleven o'clock news programs in 1956 for WCKT. He won the first of four Freedoms Foundation Awards, and a total of 11 All-American Conference to Combat Communism Vigilant Patriot Honors for the Promotion of Americanism. During the 1961 invasion of the Bay of Pigs, and the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, which almost resulted in the United States and Russia going to war, Fariss was there to cover it all. Fariss wound up his career as a news editor and anchor at WEVU in the Naples/Ft. Myers market.

It was Fariss who would eventually hire Gordon.

With an overzealous attitude, Gordon presented himself for employment to several of the local radio stations. Interviewers for the stations thought Gordon was a young man with a great voice, but they perceived him as arrogant. Not one station

called him back with an offer.

WEBK was located above Raul Vega's Dress Shop at 1521½ Seventh Avenue. The entrance to WEBK was off to the side of the dress shop and up the stairs. It was the only radio station in the Tampa Bay area running trilingual programs. WEBK had a total staff of three people, which included Fariss, and maintained a low budget with no room for new employees. Gordon asked, pleaded, and begged for any job at the station.

Radio station owners in the Tampa Bay area were looking for announcers who didn't have a southern accent. Due to his mid-western upbringing, that certainly wasn't a problem for Gordon. Fariss knew that, and found a way to hire him. The G.I. Bill offered to initially pay half of the salary to any company that would hire a former armed services veteran. Gordon was a veteran … so WEBK had a new announcer.

To Fariss, the new employee turned out to be a

blessing in more ways than just broadcasting. Shortly after Gordon began working at WEBK Radio, he talked Wayne into going on a blind date with a friend of Gordon's wife, Betty, an attractive lady named Betty Anne McCall. The result of that blind date was a 1952 wedding between Wayne Fariss and Betty Anne McCall.

On the WEBK airwaves, Gordon became the host of a rhythm and blues segment called "Long Gone." He quickly became popular as more and more listeners tuned in to his nightly program. Gordon enjoyed his stint as a DJ and he had an income of $50 a week. While the salary wasn't the greatest, he knew his efforts would pay off in the end. When a host was needed for another program, Gordon switched hats and became the host of a daytime country-western show, even going so far as to disguise his voice. As the size of his audience increased, and the phone lines became jammed with requests, Gordon became more aware of his listener's interests. He approached the radio station owner and general manager, Elmo B. Kitts,

and passed along the fact that listeners wanted a nightly sports program that would allow them to get a little closer to their local legends. Kitts thought Gordon was on the right track, but the station didn't have the budget to support a new show. The answer was simple: Gordon could have 15 minutes of air time for a new sports show, as long as he acquired enough sponsors to cover the production costs.

Gordon didn't see that as a problem and he hit the sidewalks of Ybor City searching for sponsors. He already knew every restaurant, cocktail lounge, and commercial establishment on the main thoroughfare, and greeted most of the businessmen by their first names. Word spread quickly that a new sports radio show was looking for sponsors, and Gordon's idea for a program became a reality.

The first key sponsorship came from George Spoto, a clothing salesman who also owned part of a local racetrack called Speedway Park. Gordon spoke often about his good luck when he went in to

buy a pair of pants and first met George. The price for the pants is unknown, but the talent fee for sponsorship was one dollar per show. More importantly, a friendship was forged that would last their lifetimes.

Gordon realized that more than sponsorship was needed for the sports show to be successful. As he studied the demographics of various athletic events in the area, he realized that two sports in particular were important to his listeners but were just plain ignored by the media. Professional wrestling was held every week with 1,500 to 2,000 fans attending. Twice a week, more than 2,000 stock car racing fans watched their hometown heroes duel on the local ovals. Neither of these sports was considered worthy of media coverage, and without that, both sports lacked credibility. The big stations and network affiliates were more aligned to society sports, such as golf and tennis. In 1950, Gordon formulated his goal: he was going to change the face of professional wrestling and stock car racing in Tampa. With George Spoto as his

friend, Gordon had the contacts he needed to bring race drivers into the radio station for interviews. In order to complete his plan and satisfy his listening audience, Gordon had to establish a contact in the world of professional wrestling.

The idea of meeting the head of Tampa's wrestling promotion made Gordon a little more uneasy than walking into the average establishment. He had heard that the promoter was a tough character; a man who, as a skinny 16-year-old boy, had been befriended by a traveling carnie and had worked the sideshow circuits in Oklahoma during the Great Depression. He wasn't particularly good, but he was an "okay" wrestler who enjoyed the physical combat and earned anywhere from two to five dollars a night as a professional grappler. His name was Clarence Preston Luttrall, better known as "Cowboy" Luttrall, owing to the signature cowboy hat he always wore. Billed in the pros as the "Texas Badman," Luttrall kicked his opponents, gouged their eyes, bent their fingers, and did whatever was

necessary to win a match (J. Selman C-1). He learned first-hand how to work the crowd from both inside and outside the ring. In 1935, during a show at the Norfolk, Virginia City Auditorium, Luttrall was awarded the victory over his opponent. The decision caused pandemonium as fans charged the ring, heaving beer and pop bottles at Luttrall, while others yelled obscenities at him.

In 1940, Luttrall challenged one of America's greatest boxers, Jack Dempsey, who held the world heavyweight boxing title from 1919 to 1926. By this time, Dempsey was 45 years old and was earning money traveling the wrestling circuits as a guest referee. During the match, Luttrall got smacked around pretty good, but gamely stood toe to toe with Dempsey. After nearly being counted out several times by the referee, Luttrall got to his feet near the ropes. A looping, left-handed swing from Dempsey sent Luttrall through the ropes and ended the match. The blow fractured Luttrall's jaw and cheekbone, and loosened Cowboy's eyeball in its socket. After he received treatment at a nearby

hospital, Luttrall returned to professional wrestling, although from that day forward, his sight was impaired in one eye.

Luttrall was ready to hang up his wrestling trunks and boots, but he still envisioned a place for himself in the business. After settling in Tampa, Cowboy took over as the local wrestling promoter in 1949. Through his company, Deep South Sports, Luttrall staged live wrestling matches for more than a year and began looking for ways to boost his sagging box office figures. It was about that time that the young radio man named Gordon Solie walked into his office.

Gordon figured that he'd only have one shot at pitching Luttrall for a sponsorship. Smiling, he extended his hand to Cowboy, and introduced himself as, "Gordon Solie, the host of WEBK's new sports radio show." Gordon explained that he wanted to interview wrestlers on his Monday radio segment as a preview to Luttrall's Tuesday night matches in Tampa. Luttrall response was, "I

think that's a hell of an idea!"

Gordon had his wrestling sponsor and Luttrall would get some badly needed publicity. Interviews on Gordon's sports show were not limited to wrestlers, but included stock car drivers and local boxers.

As the radio program gained momentum, George Spoto asked Gordon to do some announcing for the stock car races at Speedway Park in Tampa.

It was a seasonal position, but one that Gordon could not pass up. When Gordon wasn't on the radio, he was at the race track. His voice, which he described as "sixteen pounds of gravel," had definitely been noticed in the Tampa area. On top of that, Cowboy Luttrall strolled into WEBK one night and offered to pay Gordon five dollars a night to be the ring announcer for the weekly wrestling matches at Fort Homer Hesterly Armory in Tampa. Gordon asked Cowboy what the job entailed and how he wanted it done. Cowboy

looked him straight in the eye and said, "I want you to treat it just like you treat your paycheck — seriously!"

The spots on the radio for Luttrall's wrestling promotion evolved into hot interviews, and listeners tuned in to hear the wrestlers boast about their abilities. Gordon, in turn, would calmly question them about their opponent for the next evening's match. The wrestlers played right back into Gordon's questions with bold opinions, pleasing some listeners and antagonizing others. At times, a wrestler would begin an interview by saying something nice about his opponent, and slowly build into a rage of what would happen once they were inside the ring. On Wednesday, Gordon would do a follow-up show reporting the results of the wrestling matches. He relayed the information with such sincerity that fans were compelled to tune in the following Monday for the continuing saga. No one questioned Gordon Solie about the veracity of professional wrestling. If Gordon said it, then it must be true. Wrestling

needed credibility, and that's what Gordon gave it. Within one year of moving to Tampa, Gordon had landed jobs in radio, racing, and wrestling. His schedule was busy and demanding, and, unfortunately, home became just a place to rest in-between jobs.

On January 9, 1951, CBS radio stations across the country honored Bing Crosby for his 20 years as a singer in show business. The program, sponsored by Chesterfield, was entitled A Salute to Bing Crosby. An all-star lineup of guests appeared on the show, including Bob Hope, Jack Teagarden, Louis Armstrong, Amos 'n' Andy, Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy, Judy Garland, Ella Fitzgerald, and Mary Martin. Art Linkletter served as emcee. For WEBK's participation, Gordon received a thank-you letter from Bing Crosby dated March 8, 1951.

Larger radio stations in Tampa, which had previously passed on hiring Gordon, suddenly began to notice the 22-year-old young man who

was rapidly building a base of loyal listeners and happy sponsors. Even Gordon's home life appeared to be on the upswing as the Solies were expecting their first child in early November 1951. During the summer months prior to the anticipated birth, Gordon met Milt Spencer, who worked as a sportscaster at WFLA radio. Through Spencer, the network radio station brass sent a message to Gordon: "We'd like to talk to you."

Subsequently, Gordon was hired as a staff member at WFLA and teamed up with Spencer on a nightly sports show. Their first show, titled "Sportsreel," aired on September 10, 1951. At 11:15 P.M. on Monday through Thursday, a complete summary of local and national sports news was provided during the 25-minute program. The weekend program began ten minutes earlier in order to provide full coverage of local high school games. The public loved hearing the scores at night, rather than having to wait for the morning paper to arrive on their doorstep. "Sportsreel" provided the most up-to-the-minute scoring

reports, including reports via telephone from Tribune staff writers of games played outside the Tampa Bay area. Innovative in their approach, Gordon and Milt also aired taped interviews of sports personalities from events around the world.

One night, while attending a dinner at the Columbia Restaurant, Milt reacted to his overindulgence in food and drink. When they returned to the station for the nightly show, Milt developed the hiccups. The show was set up to volley the sports items back and forth between Gordon and Milt. Gordon opened the show with the tennis report, and then said, "Here's Milt with the latest baseball scores." Just as Gordon uttered the word "scores," Milt hiccupped. Not one time throughout the entire broadcast did Milt hiccup during his segment. However, he would hiccup every time Gordon finished his segment. Everyone listening assumed Gordon was inebriated, and rumors flew around Tampa about "that drunk, Solie" (Austin D1).

In November 1951, Gordon and Betty welcomed a new baby daughter named Pamela Gaye. Gordon's sister, Gaye, was thrilled to have the newest family member share her name. Gordon later referred to Pam as "my original first child." The new grandparents on Gordon's side of the family were also excited to hear the news of their first grandchild's birth, and sent a telegram welcoming their first grandchild to the family. Luella's reaction was expected, but Gordon was surprised that Pierre seemed to be thrilled, as well. He thought perhaps the old man had finally accepted him. Even Gordon's mother-in-law, Marion Barber, acknowledged his existence, if only for a short time.

Marion had her own brief claim to fame after marrying William Barber in the 1930s. The marriage didn't last long, but the name "Barber" became famous thanks to her stepson, Walter "Red" Barber, who became one of the most revered sports radio announcers in history for his play-by-play coverage of big-league baseball and

many other nationally broadcast sporting events. By the time Gordon met Betty, her mom had been divorced for years and there was no contact between Marion and Red. That was a shame because Gordon would have loved to establish a relationship with a broadcaster like Red Barber. Instead, he was stuck dealing with Red's one-time stepmother. The new baby helped the relationship between Marion and Gordon, but in no way eliminated all the tension. One of the biggest strains came from the fact that Gordon and Betty were temporarily living with Marion at the time.

Milt Spencer sent a congratulatory telegram to his friend and wrote that he was looking forward to an interview with the new addition. He also advised Gordon to stick to predicting football results since the new father's guess on the baby's gender was incorrect. Gordon asked his close friends, George and Teresa Spoto, to stand up as one set of the Godparents to the new baby girl. The honor was proudly accepted.

Covering the local sports scene for WFLA, Gordon held press cards for the Inter-Social Baseball League and local race tracks, as well as continuing his work with Luttrall. When the racing season opened up again, he announced races at Speedway Park and other dirt tracks in the area. Gordon's new and varied contacts continued to include him in more and more events in the Tampa Bay area.

In February 1952, Gordon and five other employees of WFLA Radio had the best seats in the house for Tampa's Gasparilla Pirate Invasion and Parade, the annual re-enactment of a [mythical] pirate invasion supposedly led by José Gaspar in the late 1700s or early 1800s. Using "Handi-Talkies" and shortwave transmitters, Mardi Liles, Milt Spencer, Paul Jones, Pat Chambers, and Gordon reported the story of the invasion as it unfolded before their eyes. Different vantage points were used so the listening audience wouldn't miss a single pirate action or description of a parade float. Back in the control room of

WFLA, coordinator Tom Matthews made sure everything was in readiness for the remote broadcast. Gordon loved every single minute of being a broadcaster. To him, it wasn't just a job. It was a lifestyle.

Regardless of his rising success, it seemed that Gordon and Betty spent most of their time together at odds with one another. Regretfully, what had once seemed to be a good idea was quickly turning unpleasant. He would later term his marriage as "an experiment that failed."

Gordon couldn't understand why anyone would want to argue all the time. He hated arguing. Arguing stirred up too many bad memories of a childhood he would just as soon forget. He had such good intentions in the beginning, but things just weren't working out. No longer did he or his wife share the same interests or goals in life. No matter how hard he tried to convince himself that he could make it work, in his heart, he knew better. That wouldn't be news to his mother-in-law. She

made no bones about the fact that she never approved of her daughter marrying a smooth talking "Yankee."

Home was a depressing place. Out of frustration, he began leaving home earlier and earlier for work. As he walked out the door, he imagined himself leaving her. He could survive that. When it came to his career, nothing was going to stand in his way. Nothing! Then he thought about leaving his child, and he remembered his own father leaving him. That word "abandon" pierced him like a freshly sharpened knife. There was something special about being a parent. Regardless of what anyone else thought or said, he loved that little, blonde child of his, especially when she called him "Daddy." His mother couldn't get over how much the toddler reminded her of Gordon as a baby. Yes, he had to agree. He could see himself in her, and he wanted to be there for her when she needed him. In his heart, he knew she deserved a full-time father, not a part-timer. Nobody would ever say he didn't love his child. He wanted his

child to experience happiness, something that had always eluded him. He didn't want her to grow up feeling the ever-gnawing sense of sadness and loneliness that he felt.

The bickering between Gordon and Betty kept him away from home more and more. One particular day, Gordon knew he needed to diffuse the escalating tension at home, so he left and went for a drive. Driving gave him lots of quiet time and there was no one in the car to argue with. He thought about street shopping the car lots. If something caught his eye then Gordon would stop, especially if it was a cherry-red Triumph! Gordon headed west on Gandy Boulevard, a few blocks from the Gandy Bridge, and several strings of colored triangular flags appeared, flapping in the breeze from Tampa Bay. As he got closer, the flapping sound grew louder and continued to hold to hold his attention. Standing outside the small office was Bud Sherk, owner of the car lot, and a man who also liked to race cars. Both gentlemen knew each other from the race track and during

their conversation, Gordon asked if Bud might need another salesman. “Only a good one" was the response from Bud.

Gordon asked, "Would you consider hiring someone with a schedule like mine?”

Bud answered "yes" and a simple hand shake sealed the deal. Maybe that red Triumph with polished silver trim would just happen to show up the lot one day. But it had to be a convertible; something smooth, shiny and classy.

Gordon put on a happy face when he was with friends, or when he was on the air. Deep inside him, however, was an ever-present feeling of unhappiness. He asked himself why he never felt deserving of the accolades and compliments laid on him by other people. Saying thank you was just as difficult as saying he was sorry.

One afternoon, shortly before the birth of his second child, Gordon decided to go to a dimly lit,

smoke-layered bar, where the conversation was simple, rather than return home. Sipping on a Canadian Club and water, Gordon thought to himself, "I'm going to have another child. There's no way I can leave her now. What will people think?" He remembered the rough life his mother had after divorcing his birth father. Society in the 1950s would be extremely critical of a man leaving his wife and small children. A wife divorcing her husband was a different story; especially if small children were involved. Even the courts would stand by the woman. As he gazed around the bar, he thought, "Everyone here has a problem and yet everyone here thinks they have the solution to everyone else's problem." He asked the barkeep for a refill as he lit another cigarette. Somewhere, he once read that in order for a writer to increase his writing abilities, he should practice spontaneous writing, so he wrote down the thoughts that were spinning around in his head. Perhaps later, he could make some sense out of them. As he wrote, Gordon realized that something had to change.

Around this same time, an announcing job opened at WPLA, the sister station of WFLA. WPLA was located in Plant City, just 30 minutes west of Tampa. Gordon thought Plant City would be a good place to put down some roots, even if they were only temporary.

In the 1950s, Plant City was a growing town with a population of around 11,000. At one time, the town was a cotton center, but later changed its primary crop to strawberries. Today, Plant City is known as the winter strawberry capital of the world. As the city spread out in all directions, so did the housing needs.

Temple Street was part of a brand new subdivision on the outer edge of Plant City, the perfect location for petite two and three-bedroom ranch houses with a carport, just big enough for a growing family. Old orange trees lined the sparsely wild-grassed, sandy yards and driveways. Residents could hear the rooster's crow early in the morning, watch the Brahma Bulls graze across

in the field, and hear the church bells on Sunday morning. Fathers left the house for work every morning and returned every evening. Mothers stayed home and raised their children. Families ate dinner together. Weekends found neighbors working in their yards, fathers playing with their children, children playing with other children, families enjoying barbecues and attending church on Sundays. It was "Small Town USA" and the radio station reached out to a scattered rural audience.

Moving to Plant City provided more than just a change of scenery. In September 1953, Jonard Pierre Sjoblom II was born. He had dark hair and blue eyes, just like his mother, and was nicknamed "Baby Joe." Three months later, Gordon's parents and his sister, Gaye, made the long trip from Minnesota to Florida for a Christmas visit. The Solie family also grew to include Cookie, a medium-sized, black dog with a white patch on her chest; Penny, a small, mixed dog; a regal-looking, black, Persian cat, appropriately named Sir

Thomas; Boots, a tabby cat; and a parakeet named Mickey.

With another mouth to feed, Gordon continued announcing for WPLA and occasionally wrote news articles as a Plant City correspondent for the Lakeland Ledger newspaper. During one year, he covered more than 35 stories, ranging from the local police beat to major town initiatives. He enjoyed writing, but didn't see much of a future for himself as a fulltime journalist. Instead, Gordon envisioned himself more involved with professional wrestling, especially since Cowboy Luttrall hired him to take over the publicity for Deep South Sports, in addition to his ring announcing duties.

Auto racing continued to draw Gordon's attention, and he announced weekend races for Speedway Park or other tracks in the Tampa Bay area. One night at Speedway Park, Gordon, representing WPLA, tested his own skills at driving. Considered a lead foot by his friends, he

won the eight-lap disc jockey race. The half-lap lead he maintained on fellow DJ, Vince Malloy of WDAE, gave Gordon the checkered flag. Fellow DJ, Cuz'n Larry Lake of WEBK, took third place, even after his car twice caught on fire during the race. According to race reports, Gordon and Pat Chambers of WFLA volleyed back and forth for the lead early in the competition. However, Chamber's car spun out on a curve and never moved for the rest of the race. That same night, Pancho Alvarez and Jack Arnold battled for the checkered flag in a 12-lap point race with Alvarez being the first to cross the finish line in front of 1,500 fans.

Pancho first met Gordon in the early 1950s and recalled the occasion: "I was in a drug store, and this man walked up to me and said, 'You're Pancho Alvarez, aren't you?' I didn't know who the guy was, and I asked him why he wanted to know. He said that he followed stock car racing and introduced himself as Gordon Solie, host of a local radio show."

Gordon was well aware of Pancho's exploits as a veteran chauffeur [a common term for race car drivers]. Before Gordon met him, Pancho went on a racing tour with promoter Al Sweeney. "One day, we showed up to race," said Pancho, "and a group of fifty or sixty people were waving like crazy at me. They looked like a group of fans I might see in parts of Tampa or Ybor City, but not in Nebraska at the time. All of a sudden, a cop came up to me and asked me if I would be able to hang around after the races. I told him that I could stay for a while because we were racing in Kansas the next day, and we weren't pressed for time. I was still curious about the fans, and the cop said, 'Well, all those people are from your home town and want to meet you.' 'My home town?' was all I could get out before the cop said, 'Yeah, Havana.' My first thought was, 'Oh sh–.' I had never even been to Havana. It turned out that Sweeney billed me as Pancho Alvarez, the Cuban and South American Champion."

"Of course," Pancho continued, "I got in

Sweeney's face and told him I had to get out of there. He told me to get in the car and I refused. Then he said that he'd fine me $100 a day if I didn't get in the car. That was a lot of money in those days, so I got in the car and drove the race. As I was driving toward the pit after the race, I was thinking of a way to get the hell out of there and save myself some embarrassment. It was too late. By then, the fans were swarming the pit. It turns out they were a bunch of foreign exchange students from Cuba and some attended the University of Nebraska. I explained that I was of Cuban descent, but grew up in Tampa, and I proceeded to have a nice visit with my new fans. I was still pissed at Sweeney for billing me that way in the first place, and then not even telling me about it."

It was at Speedway Park in 1953 that Gordon's path crossed with another race enthusiast, Frank Dery. Frank gave Gordon another opportunity to show his expertise on the track. Racing against fellow disc jockeys, Gordon drove a borrowed,

modified car owned by Garry Rowall, and, once again, took the checkered flag. Of course, he thought he was driving with blazing speed, but veteran drivers laughed and said they "could have driven faster on the infield."

Just after Gordon won the race, Dery challenged Gordon to a match race. Always entertaining his friends and fans with his quick wit, and sometimes sarcastic sense of humor, Gordon decided to taunt Dery about his driving abilities and issued his challenge over the PA system. "All I want is a chance to show you up on the track, fat boy." Being true showmen, Gordon and Frank set the stage for the upcoming grudge race. Dery was to break away, take a big lead, and then Gordon would catch up. The two men would then battle in a close finish.

When the big "grudge race" began, Frank Dery jumped out to an early lead, as planned. The crowd screamed for Gordon to catch up, but Dery had other plans. He kept the pedal to the metal and left

Gordon in the dust. Gordon had been too trusting and Dery got the last laugh.

In 1954, the Florida National Sports Car Races were held at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa. Gordon's voice echoed across the base as fans watched grueling races which included both veteran and home-grown drivers. The events of the day ran from 9:45 in the morning until 3:00 in the afternoon. Scheduled first was the Imperial Polk County 50-mile race of modified cars of less than 1500 ccs. After the first race was completed, Protestant and Catholic masses were held in three different chapels on the base. Racing began again at 12:30 p.m. with the Festival of States Parade 50-mile Race, followed by the Gasparilla Trophy Race. A queen was crowned and the final race, the Governor Dan McCarty Memorial Race, which covered 200 miles, concluded the day's events.

Shortly after the races at MacDill, Gordon added a service for his radio crowd dealing with the safety of automobile drivers on the highways. On

Sunday afternoons, he paired up with Walker Oliver of the Highway Patrol Safety Division, informing the public of "The Sixth Commandment." The program was sponsored by the Plant City Jaycees, the Florida Highway Patrol, and WPLA. Gordon traveled with Oliver to actual accident scenes, interviewed victims, reviewed the accident, and tried to help drivers adhere to the Sixth Commandment, which reads, "Thou shall not commit murder."

When a local hot rod group (not to be confused with local "Shot Rods") from the Plant City area showed some initiative in promoting safe and courteous driving, Gordon provided them with on-the-air support. After one of his former high school friends suffered life-altering injuries during a motorcycle accident, Gordon became passionate about the promotion of road safety. Second, Gordon saw the issue as a win-win situation because the other initiative of the group was to enhance their member's knowledge of automobile mechanics.

Sharing his mother's stand on civic duty, Gordon became a contributing member of the Jaycees, Rotary Club, Junior Chamber of Commerce, and was an active member of St. Peter's Episcopal Church. The town people were very important to him and Gordon spent extra time getting to know the locals over cups of coffee and drinks at the local watering establishments. He learned about their families, politics, hobbies, likes, and dislikes. By adding interesting tidbits of information to his radio show, he made it a personalized program for the local listeners. They were his ears, and he became their voice.

His voice was still heard in Tampa, too, as he continued to introduce the wrestling matches in the ring for Cowboy Luttrall. Gordon not only liked Cowboy, but he respected him, and on occasion, even feared him. Luttrall threw periodic parties at his home for local law enforcement officers, politicians, and media, along with some staff and/or wrestlers from Deep South Sports. Tom McEwen, a well known Tampa sportswriter, said

Luttrall was on a short list of people who could afford to throw big parties at the time.

According to Tom, at one of Luttrall's get-togethers, Gordon consumed quite a bit of alcohol, and began talking crudely to a few of the female guests. Suddenly, long, powerful fingers wrapped themselves around his throat, and he felt his feet rise up off the ground. "You watch your mouth around the ladies," barked Luttrall. Gordon gasped for air as the strong hand released its grip and his feet once again settled onto the floor. He wasn't hurt, but he was very embarrassed. From then on, he was careful about what he said at Luttrall's parties.

Gordon was later involved with Luttrall in another incident. While the two of them were walking down the sidewalk, a car whizzed by and shots were fired in their direction. He always thought the bullets were meant for Cowboy, but Gordon never knew for sure.

Gordon continued to pursue his entrepreneurial interests, as well, and formed a company called Solie Recording Service, which offered to record wedding vows onto phonograph records as a memento of the occasion. The newspaper ads referred to the service as a "real" living record of important life events. Much to his wife's dismay, he continued to hold onto the seasonal jobs, including a short stint when he raised chickens. The only thing he really learned from the job was that he wasn't a farmer.

Gordon's next role in life pleased him much more as he stood backstage in February 1955 as a participant in the Plant City Strawberry Festival. Since 1930, excluding a six-year hiatus for World War II, Plant City showed off its agricultural wealth and feminine beauty by presenting the Strawberry Festival. Year after year, the headlines in the Sunday edition of the Tampa Tribune publicized the opening day events. Each year, a queen was crowned, and bluegrass bands provided the musical background for the small, but growing,

town festival. As luck would have it, Gordon, along with James Quarles, was appointed co-chairman of the beauty contest. The contest decided the new Strawberry Queen from among 40 young ladies. There was no need to ask Gordon if he enjoyed his duties on the committee. When it came to beautiful women, there was no question about whether or not he enjoyed it. For many years, Gordon recalled stories of the feminine beauty on hand in Plant City during what he referred to as "those six glorious days."

While working at WPLA, Gordon decided to try his hand at some college courses. He wanted to take two classes at the University of Tampa, but he didn't have the funds for tuition. In order to pay for the classes, Gordon became the station manager for WUTV, the university radio station. Much like WEBK, the staff was small and the audience was even smaller. On May 8, 1955, Gordon stopped by the campus and asked Jim Gallagher, WUTV sports director, if he would like to catch Hank Snow's country western performance. Snow's

manager, Tom Parker (later known as Colonel Tom Parker) was testing the waters with a new opening act. When Gallagher and Gordon arrived backstage at the Tampa Armory, they heard the audience screaming and hollering. The sound of the audience was deafening. Gordon turned to a stage hand and said, "Hank Snow must be really good tonight."

The stage worker said, "Snow hasn't been on yet. This is some new guy named Elvis Aaron Presley."

Hank Snow's All-Star Jamboree was featured in the Armory twice that day: a matinee at 2:30 in the afternoon and an 8:30 evening performance. Elvis performed both times. As a reminder of the evening, Gordon kept a few souvenirs in his files — an autographed, color photo of Hank Snow, and four color photos of an Elvis Presley portrait.

Other than hosting special events like the jamboree, the Armory in Tampa was not as busy as

it had been during the previous months. Wrestling fans normally showed up every Tuesday night for Cowboy Luttrall's scheduled matches, but not in the month of May. Florida's tourists were a big part of Luttrall's fan base, and the "snowbirds," as they are called, were usually heading back up north by the middle of April. Accordingly, in 1955, Cowboy stopped his weekly matches on April 11 and reopened for a summer series on June 20. It is not known whether Elvis was aware that the local wrestling promotion was on a seasonal break when he performed that May in Tampa. It is known, however, that Elvis was a wrestling fan. In fact, it has been told that Elvis not only liked pro wrestling, but he knew a lot of the performers. He was friends with Mary Lillian Ellison, aka "Slave Girl Moolah," later known as the "Fabulous" Moolah, the long-time women's world wrestling champion. Elvis also established a rapport with lady grappler Penny Banner, and according to different sources, he even went to the Mid-South Coliseum in Memphis to watch her wrestle.

His bookings took Elvis to many venues which were either known at the time, or recognized later, as cities for professional wrestling cards. He entertained crowds at the Robinson Auditorium in Little Rock, the North Side Coliseum in Fort Worth, the legendary Sportatorium in Dallas (a building that was famous for decades of pro wrestling), Fair Park Coliseum in Lubbock, Kiel Auditorium in St. Louis, and sold out the Greensboro Coliseum in North Carolina, a building known for hosting the first ever Starrcade wrestling card in 1983.

Elvis returned to Tampa's Armory in late July 1955 as part of a show which featured Andy Griffith as the headliner. Griffith became famous for his role as "Sheriff Taylor" on the Andy Griffith Show and later as the lead actor in Matlock.

Jim Gallagher enthusiastically spoke about going with Gordon to the Hank Snow Country Jamboree in Tampa. Even more important to Jim, however,

were his sentiments about his fellow broadcaster. "Gordon really taught me a lot, especially when it came to calling a stock car race. I listened to Gordon's live racing broadcasts on numerous occasions and he was exceptional. He focused on the action going on up in the front of a race, particularly the first three or four cars, but then almost without effort, Gordon mixed in numerous comments about what was happening in the middle of the field or at the rear. Gordon grasped every aspect of a race and then relayed that to the fans though an outstanding voice."

Gordon's mentoring definitely paid off for Jim. After building a good reputation for his play-by-play football coverage, Jim Gallagher became known as the "Voice" of Sebring International Raceway.

In 1955, Gordon resigned his announcing position at WPLA. He had two children and the late night hours were not working out with the family life. So, in another attempt to regroup his

life and marriage, he took a job with Hendricks Homes, handling sales, advertising, and sales promotions. The eastern rural areas of Hillsborough County were beginning to sprout more housing developments, commonly called the suburbs. Florida's population was growing, so the real estate market was a good place to find that "real" job spoken about by his wife. A "nine-to-five" job suited Betty, so Gordon was willing to try things her way, but he was a confirmed night owl. It would be an understatement to say the next few years were a bit rough.

Gordon didn't mind selling because he liked interacting with people, but he really missed the time spent at a radio microphone, and financially, he wasn't any better off selling houses. Things were definitely tight, and bill collectors knocked on the door on a regular basis. Repossession was threatened on the car and the house. As he traveled back and forth to announce for Luttrall, Gordon realized just how much he missed the city of Tampa. Small town life was fine, but he missed the

lights of a much busier city. In 1956, without much notice, Gordon sold the house and moved the family back to Tampa. He was beginning to suspect that his wife might leave him, and if that happened, he wanted to be prepared.

Once back in the "Cigar City," Gordon settled the family into a small house close to where his mother-in-law lived. To the outside world, he was still pretending that life was wonderful, when, in fact, it wasn't. He kept himself busy dealing in various enterprises. His daughter, Pam, said that he took her to events that year like the Gasparilla parade, the Strawberry Festival, and races at Speedway Park. During the Gasparilla festivities, Pam rode on a parade float representing the children of Tampa. In the spring, Gordon and Pam modeled clothing as a father/daughter duo at Tampa's Britton Plaza Shopping Center. At the racetrack, Pam was often allowed in the pits, or in the stands, and was even permitted to climb the stairs with Gordon to the press box. While watching from the grandstand one day, she

witnessed a sprint car tear through the front straightaway and hurtle out of control. The car flipped over and over, and continued through the track fence, before finally coming to rest on Hillsborough Avenue. The driver was dead. Pam remembered her mom's sentiments back at their house: "That's exactly why I don't want you going to the racetrack with your dad. People get killed there!"

In June 1956, Gordon and his family made the long drive to Minneapolis for the wedding of his sister, Gaye. His sister had asked that Gordon be an usher for her upcoming ceremony. He hoped the car would make the 1,600 mile trip. Spending 24 hours in a car with two small children wasn't exactly a ride through the park, but he knew he could endure that part of the journey. The backseat of the car had suffered a décor makeover with the addition of a mattress, pillows, children's books, and toys. The back doors were tied to the rear bumper for safety. In those days, there were no child-proof locks on the back doors of

automobiles. The door handles on the outside of cars at the time were push button, and there was a space between the car door and the door handle. People grabbed the door handle with four fingers and used their thumb to depress a button, which subsequently released the door latch. Pam remembers her Dad tying a rope through the back door handles on both sides of the car, and securing the rope to the rear bumper. "It was one of the tackiest things Dad ever did," said Pam. "I know he wanted to make sure we didn't fall out of the car, but we drove all the way to Minnesota and back to Florida with that ugly rope looped around the back of the car. That was the last time the four of us went on a family vacation together."

A trip from Tampa to Minneapolis was a long haul for a family that was short on money. Regardless, he was going to see his sister get married. It seemed like only yesterday when Gaye was the little tag-along sister. Gaye had since grown to become a very graceful, young woman, with a gentle inner spirit. Gordon was truly happy

for her. He also hoped that maybe — just maybe — now that he had a family, his dad's heart had softened. Days later, as they drove away from his parents' house, Gordon realized that nothing had changed.

While in Minneapolis for the wedding, Gordon and his mother's brother, Floyd, spent a great deal of time together talking about the past. One morning, over a cup of coffee, Gordon asked his Uncle Floyd what he knew of Gordon's birth father. Uncle Floyd answered as many questions as he could about Frank Labiak. At one point during the conversation, Uncle Floyd asked Gordon if he would like to meet his birth father. Gordon's first response was an emphatic "No." He knew his mother would be heartbroken, and his adopted "dad" would see it as an act of disrespect. And yet, after all the years of wondering, he was being offered an opportunity to finally meet him. After serious consideration of the consequences, Gordon asked, "Where is he?"

Uncle Floyd gave him a telephone number and said, "The decision is up to you."

Making the phone call was a difficult and stomach- turning choice. Gordon and his birth father arranged to meet at a local coffee shop. When Gordon arrived, he approached the shop with caution, peeked in the window, and saw a thin man seated at a small table. Not wanting to be seen, Gordon watched the man for a few minutes from outside the coffee shop. He recognized himself in the man. Gordon slowly turned back toward the street and walked away, never stopping to look back.

Not only did Gordon pass on a visit with his biological father, but his sister's wedding was the last time Gordon ever laid eyes on his adopted father. On February 1957, Pierre Axel Sjoblom collapsed while shoveling snow and died from a heart attack. Days later, his father's will was read. Pierre left his "adopted son," Jonard Pierre Sjoblom, the sum of $100. From that day forward,

even the relationship between mother and son was somewhat estranged.

During that low point in his life, Gordon was no longer associated with any radio station. As luck would have it, he found a position on radio station WTSP-AM 1370 in Tampa under the guidance of veteran talk-show host, George Christie. George had done it all in radio — from broadcasting in Miami to calling championship boxing matches at Madison Square Garden. Because of his uncompromising and decisive editorials at WFEA Radio, George earned the nickname of "Old Crusader" (George).

Gordon continued to fine tune his radio voice, and in January 1958, he introduced a new radio program to late night listeners: two hours of music and talk from midnight to two o'clock a.m. Many from the radio audience described the show as "entertaining, relaxing, and thoroughly enjoyable." Some of those listeners were from an area about 90 miles from the southern tip of Florida … on the

island of Cuba. Late at night, with the air waves thinning, the radio dials of many Americans living in Cuba were locked in on WTSP. Their lives on the islands were changing as Cuba's government drifted away from democracy. One by one, they heard Gordon's radio program, and passed the word along to others to tune in and stay informed of what was happening between the United States and Cuba. Often, fans wrote letters to Gordon, thanking him and asking for song requests. In response, he introduced a new weekly program dedicated to those living in Cuba entitled, Salute to Havana. The show ran for 30 minutes on Thursday mornings beginning at 12:30 a.m. Gordon's comments were translated into Spanish by another announcer, Woodrow Wilson Garcia, also known as Woody. The show was deemed a success. According to a write-up in the Havana Post newspaper, Gordon's program was one of the bridges linking Florida and Cuba, and its demonstration of free press promoted closer social and commercial relations.

Taking advantage of the positive comments made about the radio program, Gordon, along with fellow media friends, Bob Larkin, Dick Stouffer, and Bob Carlton, decided to open a social organization solely for the media. PRTA stood for Press, Radio, Television, and Advertising. These four men wanted to provide a place where members of the media could discuss ideas, relax, and be entertained. Membership was $10 a year, and the old Paper Doll Club in Tampa, one of Gordon's favorite bars, was remodeled to resemble a Press Club. There was a radio broadcasting sound booth, a TV lounge for telecasts, a Hi-Fi studio, and, of course, the ever-present, licensed cocktail lounge. On many Friday and Saturday nights, live music was performed, and former recording artists like Paul Whiteman dropped by to swap stories with the local newsmen.

During Gordon's second month on the new radio show, stock car racing action picked up again in Tampa. Al Sweeney, president of National

Speedways, Inc., was familiar with Gordon's smooth, descriptive style of race calling at Speedway Park. Impressed by the ease with which such a young man could call an auto race, Sweeney asked Gordon to announce the 1958 International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) Mid-Winter Championships. The races were scheduled to run at the Florida State Fairgrounds, which were adjacent to the University of Tampa. Gordon accepted the invitation and proceeded to announce the four nights of racing. During his very first night at the mike, Gordon's voice caught the attention of Aut Swenson, the owner of a successful auto thrill show called "Thrillcade."

Swenson's show traveled on a 30,000-mile circuit to arenas and speedways throughout the United States, as well as parts of Mexico and Canada. The shows often broke attendance records as thousands of fans bought tickets to watch daredevils perform dangerous feats in cars, trucks, and motorcycles. In addition to packing 70,000 fans into the Los Angeles Coliseum, the Thrillcade

outsold leading entertainers like Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, and the Lennon Sisters when booked simultaneously at other events.

Swenson's continuing search for talent produced great results in Tampa because he reached an agreement hiring Gordon to emcee the 1958 tour. It was a good opportunity for Gordon to entertain large crowds, and he was convinced that Swenson was the real deal with more-than-suitable credentials. In fact, after winning the 1921 Northwest dirt track championship at the Minnesota State Fair, Swenson took his college engineering degree and became an advance man for the renowned Sloan organization. Alex Sloan, known for orchestrating the establishment of the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) in 1915, had big-name talent at the time. One of Sloan's drivers was Barney Oldfield, who previously tested cars for Henry Ford and went on to become the first man to drive a car 100 miles an hour. Another of Sloan's performers was Sig Haugdahl, who subsequently won the IMCA

championship five years in a row. Swenson learned much from his association with Sloan, Oldfield, and Haugdahl, all three of whom were later inducted into the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame. That knowledge guided Swenson as he later produced his own show, Austin's Greater Flying Circus. He also worked successfully with the Jimmy Lynch Death Dodgers and Joie Chitwood's 1949 show.

Aut once again went solo in 1950 and created the Swenson Thrillcade. Eight years later, Swenson's staff assembled to kick off the 1958 tour and among them was their new announcer, Gordon Solie. Since Cowboy Luttrall closed the wrestling business as usual in the spring, the new opportunity was a financial blessing for Gordon. Initially, Gordon found the Thrillcade staff cold and unwilling to help him. After all, he was the new guy. That attitude changed, however, after Gordon's first appearance. Gordon introduced a motorcycle feat in which a rider jumped from ramp to ramp over a group of men laying side-by-side on

the ground between the ramps. The motorcycle daredevil flew into the air off the first ramp and landed short of the second ramp, right on top of one of the men. Gordon put his hand over the microphone, turned his heads sideways toward some Thrillcade employees near the stage and said, "Hey, that's a neat trick." One of the appalled staff members replied sternly, "That wasn't a trick." The ambulance and rescue workers rushing to the injured man weren't part of the act, either. Obviously, Gordon felt like an idiot, but the Thrillcade employees answered all his questions after that.

In cities where it was allowed, the Thrillcade advertised before shows with a pre-performance parade. Gordon normally drove one of the Thrillcade cars during the parades.

Noted wrestling historian J Michael Kenyon, wrote:

It’s interesting to know that Solie hired on with Aut Swenson, who happened to be one of the early driving stars of the old International Motor Contest Association, the rip-roaring, dirt-track racing outfit that ran "opposition" to the establishment AAA from 1915 on, having hooked up with the state and county fair circuits. Swenson was always a promoter at heart. Early on, he cut back on his racing and began hustling the publicity for Alex Sloan, the legendary auto-racing promoter who engineered IMCA’s rise to glory and who, in an earlier day, had tub-thumped for Barney Oldfield.

There’s an earlier wrestling connection to Swenson, in fact:

St. Joseph Michigan: June 18, 1946 — Joe Savoldi, star back on Notre Dame’s national championship grid teams under Knute Rockne in 1929 and ’30, and possessor of the world’s wrestling championship in 1933 when he defeated the former king of matdom, Jim Londos, in Chicago, added a new phase to his

action-crammed life today when he signed a contract to appear with Joie Chitwood's World's Champion Auto Daredevils, a professional stunt circus playing a nine-month's route of major cities coast-to-coast. 'Jumping Joe' will leap speeding automobiles 100 feet through the air from ramp-to-ramp through fire and flame at America's leading state fairs instead of hurdling plunging linemen on the football field, according to Aut Swenson, Chitwood Circuit Manager, who signed Savoldi to a contract here today to appear at the Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Oklahoma and Louisiana State Fairs this fall with the Chitwood Daredevils.
Savoldi will continue to promote and participate in wrestling matches and manage his shuffleboard court here until the Chitwood Auto Daredevils go into their state fair circuit in August.

Although touring that summer and early fall with the Thrillcade had its rewards for Gordon, it didn't

improve things on the home front. His wife, Betty, was already frustrated with her failed attempts to keep Gordon in a "normal" job. There also was the issue of his heavy drinking, the strange hours demanded of him by the entertainment business, and all of sudden, months on the road. As much as Gordon sympathized with Betty, he still held onto his own complaints. The thought of her poking holes in his condoms to try and have a second child flashed through Gordon's mind. When that didn't work, she exploited his weakness; she waited until he was intoxicated. It seemed as if the only time he didn't have to deal with any of that was when he was behind the microphone. There were no love-hate relationships to deal with, or "fragmented relationships," as Gordon called them. When Gordon was at the microphone, no one was telling him to adhere to a certain lifestyle. He was a free man, free to describe the feats of great athletes, feats much like those of his childhood comic book heroes. When the microphone was turned off, however, Gordon's dilemma resumed. He missed Betty, Pam and Jonard, but certainly not

the tension that lay between him and his wife.

Fortunately for Gordon, he was able to work the mike that season at some spectacular events like the Canadian National Exposition, the world's largest indoor fair at the time. Gordon was elated to introduce the legendary entertainer, Danny Kaye, at the Expo. He also worked with the Thrillcade, which, along with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey circus, each presented ten shows during the Exposition. Thrillcade outsold the circus for all ten shows. In the weeks to come, Swenson's show filled the stands wherever they played, and he continued to integrate unique acts into the show, such as high wire performers, and even a ballerina. One novel performer was Johnny Maddox, a singer/musician who performed on a revolving platform in the bed of a moving pickup truck. His song "Crazy Otto Medley" sold over a million copies on the Dot recording label while Maddox was on tour with the Thrillcade.

Dutch contortionist Piet van Brechts performed

on top of a perch attached to a 1958 Ford convertible during occasional appearances with the Thrillcade. Unfortunately, Piet could not be with the Thrillcade for all performances because of other bookings, including appearances on the nationally syndicated The Ed Sullivan Show. Other stunt drivers showed the fans how to wreck cars with T-bone crashes, dive bomber crashes, and planned rollovers. Jimmy James, a performer from Chicago, drove a pickup truck from one ramp to another, sailing 80 feet into the air over a live elephant named Dyna.

It was a successful Thrillcade season, but Gordon was glad when the traveling was over and he reunited with his family and friends in Tampa. The thing he did miss upon his return was the $175-per-week salary which had been paid to him by Aut Swenson, particularly with all the changes going on in his life. Thinking he would be back on staff at WTSP, Gordon was surprised when he was told that his midnight to two a.m. program had been cut from the station's schedule. His Salute to

Havana listeners, especially Americans in Cuba, vehemently complained to the station manager, Marshall Cleaver, but to no avail. Gordon said politicians pressured the station to drop the show due to strained relations between the United States and Cuba. His listeners would have to find another straight and uncensored news source. For the time being, Gordon Solie was off the air.

Gordon still had his ring announcing and publicity duties for Cowboy Luttrall's Deep South Sports promotion, but the income derived from the venture didn't come close to allowing him to provide for his family. While searching for another shot on the radio, he frequented the library, reading books about anatomy and historical accounts of men and wrestling. He was depressed. He smoked more than his normal amount of cigarettes. In-between his job and visits to the library, he made frequent trips to the local bar, where he sat alone; watching and thinking. Another drink, another series of thoughts ...

Getting another job in radio was a priority. Unfortunately, some of the radio stations remembered that Gordon wasn't real dependable, and believed he would leave town whenever he got the urge, just like he did the previous year for the Thrillcade tour. Thankfully, however, not everybody had forgotten Gordon's talent on the mike. As luck would have it, he landed a position on the staff of WSUN-AM 62 as the host of a late-night show featuring the top recorded music, as well as a special feature called "Gulfcoast Midnight Sun with Gordon Solie." Alongside his job at WSUN, he was asked by WEDU-TV Channel 3 to act as moderator for a program that would allow viewers to call in with questions to be answered by local tax experts. The show first aired in February 1959 on Monday evenings at nine o'clock p.m. It was called "Ides of April: Beware." Suddenly, everything seemed to be hitting at once.

For the second year in a row, Gordon called the action for one of his favorite events, the IMCA

races at the Florida State Fairgrounds with top drivers like Pete Folse and Johnny Paulsen. Gordon was extremely comfortable calling the action on the ovals, and as long as an auto race needed an announcer, he was available. The other excitement in Gordon's career at the time was taking place in the world of professional wrestling.

It was festival time in Tampa and Cowboy Luttrall held a Gasparilla wrestling card featuring three main events; Dick the Bruiser vs. Paul Anderson, gold medalist in weightlifting at the 1956 Olympics and billed as the "world's strongest man;" Antonino Rocca vs. Gene "Mr. America" Stanlee; and women's world champion, The Fabulous Moolah, vs. Ella Waldek.

Gordon's part of the business, ring announcing and publicity, was going extremely well, until spring, when wrestling in Tampa shut down again for the annual seasonal break. That helped Gordon make the decision to join the Thrillcade for a second tour. During the 1959 Thrillcade season,

Gordon again introduced the performers at packed arenas throughout the United States and parts of Mexico and Canada. The Thrillcade again broke all-time attendance records at venues like the Red River Valley State Fair in Fargo, North Dakota.

When the tour ended, Gordon headed back to Tampa. Wrestling seemed to be busier than ever, and promoters from 13 states were preparing for the annual November meeting of the Southern Wrestling Alliance [SWA]. The promoters would be electing new officials and discussing future plans. They also planned to recognize just one wrestler as the Southern heavyweight champion. At the time, promoters in North Carolina, Georgia, and Florida each had their own version of the Southern heavyweight title. There also was a lot of talk about the venue for the meeting. Cowboy Luttrall was lobbying to have the meeting in Tampa, but promoters in New Orleans, Memphis, Atlanta, and Charlotte each wanted the meeting held in their own territories. Charlotte was the base of operations for Jim Crockett, Sr., the

president of the Southern Wrestling Alliance.

In Tampa, a new column titled "Sport Shots with Solie" appeared in The Sportscaster, Tampa's souvenir wrestling program. In his first column, Gordon wrote, "Carpenters have been busy this past week repairing the ring damage caused by wild Eddie. Last week, Ed snatched several ring supports from the underside and was using them with reckless abandon on anyone who got in his way." Gordon went on to tell how Eddie Graham claimed that he had been robbed of the match, and how Graham claimed wrestler Harry Smith entered the ring when he had no reason to be there. In addition, Graham argued that Ray Villmer, his opponent in the match, put three cuts on his forehead when he hit him with a 2x4. Villmer didn't have much to say, but insisted that the match, the [Southern heavyweight] title, and the belt were still his. Joey Maxim, the former light heavyweight boxing champion who refereed the match, told Gordon that he never had such a workout before. "These are two really tough guys. It was too bad I

had to hit Graham, but I felt he had it coming," said Maxim. Gordon closed his column by reminding fans that the matches had been filmed and could be seen on Saturday afternoon on Tampa's WFLA-TV. He and Milt Spencer were "sitting mike-side," and they looked forward to feedback from the fans.

The December 1, 1959 edition of The Sportscaster mentioned that Antonino Rocca, a real crowd pleaser, was going to perform in Tampa. At his last appearance in Madison Square Garden, 5,000 fans were turned away from a "standing room only" show that drew more than $60,000 into the box office. Luttrall claimed grapplers from all over the south were asking him for a match with Rocca. One of them was Don Curtis, a wrestler who did a lot of volunteer work with youths. Curtis' ended many of his matches by putting his opponents to sleep with a hold known as (what else?) "the sleeper hold." Wrestling fans in attendance who doubted the authenticity of Don's sleeper hold were given an opportunity to volunteer during the matches. Everyone who

entered the ring was quickly put to sleep. Gordon added a final note about Curtis' accomplishment: "TV viewers were able to see the feat performed last Saturday on Channel Eight."

Luttrall's business was growing by leaps and bounds, and in Tampa, he began making plans to move from the Municipal Auditorium to Fort Homer Hesterly Armory because the building had more seating capacity. One of the key factors in Luttrall's business expansion was the positive results from Gordon's publicity. Gordon also was asked to submit a prospectus (see image below) for a proposed Southern Wrestling Alliance book.

The complete draft included rules for matches, championships, referees, timekeepers, physicians, penalties for infractions, and so forth. In addition, Gordo set up an outline for a trust fund, the "Wrestler's Guild," which would help take care of grapplers who were injured. The book was put on hold in mid-December 1959. It isn't known whether the book was ever published.

Beginning in November 1959, Gordon began writing a column that would educate the fans. He wrote in his column: "Wrestling holds are divided into two groups: the pinning holds, and the punishing, or submission, holds." He listed the five ways a wrestler could lose a match: "by being pinned, by conceding to a punishing hold, by disqualification, by being injured and unable to continue, or by referee's decision, with the latter rarely occurring." It was noted by Gordon that the punishing holds were not allowed in amateur or intercollegiate competition. Gordon also invited fans who wished to form a fan club for their favorite wrestler to call him at the wrestling office. The first clubs organized were for Ray Villmer, Judy Glover, and Don Eagle, with a club for Harry Smith in the works.

As attendance at professional wrestling shows in Tampa continued to grow, Gordon was happy to see Deep South Sports give back to the community. His boss, Cowboy Luttrall, became a benefactor of the Florida Sheriffs Boys Ranch. The concept for

the Boys Ranch began with the Texas Boys Ranch near Amarillo, Texas. The program develops residential care facilities for troubled boys and gives them opportunities to participate in an education program, sports, arts and crafts, outdoor activities, and a structured work program. Wrestlers Cal Farley and Dory Funk, Sr. were synonymous with the development of the Boys Ranch in Texas.

The Florida Sheriffs Boys Ranch was implemented by Hillsborough County Sheriff Ed Blackburn. Many of the wrestlers gave of their time and money to help both the program and the boys. It was discovered when wrestler Eddie Graham (who later became the wrestling promoter in Florida) saw a bumper sticker on a vehicle about the ranch. Graham knew about the Texas program because he had been involved in the Texas Boys Ranch when he wrestled in Amarillo. During his time there, he had been awarded the title of Honorary Superintendent. After seeing the bumper sticker, Eddie mentioned it to Deputy

Sheriff Horton at the matches on the following Tuesday night. Horton was aware of the program and gave Eddie the information he sought. Graham talked to Don Curtis and the two collaborated in an effort to educate Tampa residents about the needs of the Florida Boys Ranch. The only thing they said to Luttrall was, “They need help." Luttrall immediately suggested they promote a special wrestling show in the community and donate the proceeds to the ranch. He knew the money raised would help defray expenses at the ranch, but more important was the number of people who would learn about the ranch through their television, radio, and newspaper spots. In addition to Cowboy Luttrall’s generosity, the wrestlers and media donated their services to help the boys living at the ranch.

As Christmas approached, advance sales for the ranch benefit were doing well. Gordon provided more background information in his column by mentioning a book he was reading titled A Shirttail To Hang To. Written by author, Beth Day, the story

was about wrestler Cal Farley and his Boys Ranch. Chapter 11 in the book described what happened when pro wrestler Dory Funk, Sr. went to spend a three-month term as a ranch superintendent. He ended up staying for three years. Funk, his wife, and their two sons, Dory, Jr. and Terry, actually lived on the ranch with the boys. Funk believed that all boys, if given the right opportunities and training, had the ability to become good U.S. citizens. At his own expense, Funk flew in to Tampa and appeared on the December 22, 1959 fund-raiser. Gordon followed suit and also appeared as a volunteer at the charity event.

To local residents, it seemed as if Gordon Solie was everywhere. For the third consecutive year, he was the announcer for the IMCA races at the Florida State Fairgrounds. He could be found at the fair. He was heard on the radio. His promotional columns appeared in the Tampa Tribune newspaper. He was a regular at charity events. To add to his long list of accomplishments,

Gordon was an associate member of the Tampa Police Athletic League and an honorary member of the Florida Sheriff's Association.

In 1960, Gordon introduced some of the biggest stars of professional wrestling as top talent from all over the world made their way into the state, including Killer Kowalski (billed as the world heavyweight champion), Don Eagle, The Sheik, Antonino Rocca, Dick the Bruiser, and Haystack Calhoun. Cowboy Luttrall began to depend more and more on Gordon's publicity, and even appointed Gordon to the position of editor for The Sportscaster.

The fighting in Tampa wasn't limited to just the wrestling matches at the Armory. Gordon and Betty just couldn't get along, and they argued constantly. It wasn't long before Betty Sjoblom filed for a divorce. The grounds ... .well, let's just say she was justified in leaving him. Worried that Betty would not let him see his children, Gordon found an apartment not too far from their house so he

could see them as often as possible. His mother was pressuring Gordon to move back to Minnesota to help out in the family business. Bill collectors were hounding him for money. Child support was going to be awarded to Betty. It seemed to Gordon that everybody wanted something from him.

The only good thing to come of the divorce was that he could get on with his life as he saw fit, without a wife telling what he should and shouldn't do.

Chapter 3: Cracked by a Potato

Eddie Graham and Gordon on the set of *Championship Wrestling from Florida*

Other than Sunday visitations with his children,

settling into the life of a bachelor wasn't a difficult task for Gordon. Planning outings with Pam and Jonard simply wasn't his forte. Sometimes Gordon and his children would go to Fairyland Park (now Lowry Park Zoo), visit his friends, take in a car race or go to a bar where he ordered them each a kiddies' drink, oddly named, a Girl Scout and a Boy Scout. Pam remembers sitting at a table away from the bar watching her dad visit with his friends. She just sat there and watched him. Later, Gordon admitted that he wasn't the best at that "father visitation thing."

Often, Gordon was late, or just didn't show up at all because he couldn't stand going over to the ex-mother-in-law's house, especially after her comments in divorce court. Betty's attorney asked Marion in court, "When did you first notice there was a problem in Betty and Gordon's marriage?" Marion turned and shook her finger at Gordon and replied, "From the day they got married." Years later, Gordon said, "The presiding judge looked at me and rolled his eyes when Marion said that."

Gordon wanted to spend time with his kids, but the bitterness wasn't worth it. It didn't help matters when Gordon showed up for visitations in the Triumph he had always wanted. Pam thought the Triumph convertible was a pretty cool car, but her mom didn't seem to appreciate Gordon's new ride. Every time he arrived to pick up the kids, an argument would ensue. None of the adults could be polite to each other. They yelled and made accusations, while the two children watched them. He couldn't stand to see the hurt in their eyes. Maybe they should just forget him, just like he did his father. He thought, "Sometimes you have to give something up in order to get it back."

It was a relief for Pam when Don Curtis came along with Gordon on parental visitations. For Pam, the fighting began before Gordon even pulled in the driveway. Her grandmother, Marion, usually got the ball rolling with insults about Gordon, such as, "That bastard will be in my driveway soon." That was when Don became Pam's hero. She went to the car and hugged her dad, then ran to see Don.

He was tall and strong. He would pick up Pam and carry her on his shoulders. Her attention diverted, she didn't have to listen, for a while, to the fighting. One time, she was running through the yard, took a wrong step, twisted her ankle, and fell into a grassy ditch. In a flash, her hero was there. Don picked her up and told her she was okay, and for the moment, she was.

Pam did not see her dad for a time when Gordon left town in late spring of 1960, hitting the road again with the Thrillcade. While on tour, he received a newspaper clipping listing the divorce decrees in Hillsborough County, Florida. His 10-year marriage was over. Relinquishing his rights as a parent, the court gave his former wife custody of Pam and Jonard, nine and seven years old, respectively. That evening, Gordon had more than a few drinks to acknowledge his new-found freedom and subsequent loss.

Gordon especially enjoyed that "new-found freedom" part, and because of that, he began to

receive letters from a variety of women on a regular basis. The letters were addressed to:

Gordon Solie
c/o Swenson Thrillcade
PO Box 1553 S.S.S.
Springfield, Mo.

All of a sudden, there was correspondence from Jeanie in Jacksonville, IL; Bonnie in Dumas, TX; Mavis in Blytheville, AR; and Suzi in Charlotte, NC. In the midst of several encounters with ladies, Gordon fell head over heels for a woman named Terry. The relationship was so hot that Gordon and Terry made arrangements to meet close to his Thrillcade performance venues as often as possible. Evidently, Terry was affluent and traveled extensively because she corresponded with Gordon from various states, like New Jersey, Virginia and Florida. In one letter, Terry wrote to Gordon and told him she was flying from the east coast to Fargo, North Dakota in order to see him while he was performing there. Terry made it clear

that she hoped to have Gordon all to herself for four days, but if not, maybe a day together, or an afternoon, or perhaps even an evening. She really wanted to be with Gordon and the feeling was mutual. She made Gordon laugh; she made him happy, and more importantly, she made him feel good about himself. Their passion for one another, however, had more limits than just Gordon's travel itinerary. They both knew their relationship would end at the conclusion of the Thrillcade season. Gordon planned to head back to the Sunshine State and Terry would remain, at least for appearances sake, in her marriage. For whatever reason, it was a marriage that she could not leave. Gordon never forgot Terry and later paid homage to her name.

During the last part of the 1960 Thrillcade season, Gordon felt honored that people on the circuit referred to him as "the best outdoor announcer in the country." Apparently, Gordon's persona impressed more than just people. Even a performing elephant, named "Dancing Dyna" reacted when Gordon's voice boomed through the

stadium sound system. One night, as Gordon began his spiel about the upcoming act, his words got to poor Dyna. Speaking to the elephant over the public address system, Gordon said, "Don't worry Dyna. If you just hold still, nothing will happen to you. Now, hold real still, Dyna." Of course the audience was watching the truck as the driver did a few warm-up runs. Gordon got the audience's attention by saying, "Fans, if Dyna should move just a fraction of an inch and her back touches the underside of the flying vehicle, it will be curtains for the driver." Dyna began quivering and shaking her three tons of flesh, but the act went off without a hitch. The truck flew 80 feet from the ramp, over Dyna, and landed safely on the other ramp. Unfortunately, three days later, Dyna died of a heart attack.

Upon returning to Tampa and getting back to work at Deep South Sports, Gordon was given a chance to host Luttrall's new televised wrestling program. That role as host was short-lived because Gordon ticked off the wrong people during an

interview with wrestling manager, Saul Weingeroff, who made anti-American and pro-German sentiments. Complaints came in from viewers, along with pressure from a local judge. Since Gordon had been asking the questions, he was the one who was removed from the television program. His first opportunity on television ended because of political pressure applied on the media, just like Gordon's radio show, A Salute to Havana.

The fact that Gordon had become an extremely popular entertainer in Tampa did not help him escape the political pressure put on the media, nor did it make him immune to the sentiments of disgruntled fans. When fans were waiting for the opening stock car events at the 1961 Florida State Fair, Gordon had to tell the crowd the races were canceled due to the track condition being unsafe from heavy rains. Disheartened fans knew the right decision had been made, but they still gave Gordon several hearty rounds of boos.

Tom McEwen wrote about Gordon's announcement in the Tampa Tribune:

> "… warned by a friend that he should wear a raincoat when he made it [the announcement] to ward off tomatoes thrown by strong-armed spectators, Solie quipped that a tomato would feel soft. 'I got cracked by a potato once. I don't think it was directed at me, though. I hope not. You think it was?'" (10A)

Normally, Gordon's duties with Deep South Sports were discontinued in the spring when the wrestling season concluded. With the popularity of Tampa grappling at an all-time high in 1961, particularly due to the boost from television, Deep South Sports decided to make wrestling a year-round business. For Gordon, that meant a summer and fall paycheck from wrestling. It also meant he didn't have to go back on the road with the Thrillcade. He had a high regard for Aut Swenson

and the performers, but Gordon made no secret about his mixed emotions regarding the Thrillcade. The show provided great highs for Gordon at the microphone, but the travel was grueling and the time on the road had dealt the final blow to his marriage. There also was the incident when they went into town for a few drinks and some laughs, with no idea that one of the troupe would be killed by locals during a fight outside a bar. Gordon had another reason for being happy about staying in Tampa: there was a new lady in his life. He was dating Eileen Buda, a widow who had lost her husband to heart disease. She was a slender, fashionable, auburn-haired mother of three children: Danise, Greg and Eric.

Staying in town also paved the way for what Gordon tagged as "the biggest break in my career." He was approached at the wrestling matches by Frank Dery, his acquaintance from Speedway Park. Dery leased tracks at the Florida State Fairgrounds (the old fairgrounds adjacent to the University of Tampa) for stock car races. He wanted Gordon to

direct the publicity and back up "Slick" Walters as announcer. That was another dream come true for Gordon, and he was totally enthused. Dery, however, left one small detail for last. The first race on the half-mile clay track at Plant Field was only nine days away, and it was Gordon's job to get drivers and publicize the race. Ads were placed in newspapers, radio spots were purchased, and Gordon called everyone he knew that was involved in the Tampa Bay area racing scene. The first event ran smoothly, and it wasn't long before Dery began drawing sizable crowds for racing cards. He also received attention for an event billed as the "Florida Stock Car Championships." Dery said it was a big success, with 6,000 fans and a surprisingly large field of 80 cars showing up for the event. It was the largest crowd to ever attend stock races at the fairgrounds, other than when the annual Florida State Fair was operating.

The next Dery Sports Promotions' racing card switched over to the quarter-mile dirt track at

Phillips Field, which also was located on the fairgrounds. More than 3,600 people heard Gordon announce a stock car race, a contest which ended with one of the strangest finishes ever. A chauffeur named Eddie Mena was close to crossing the finish line for victory when he lost all electrical power in his car. Mena's car shut down completely. Chet Rutledge could not get around Mena, so he used the front of his car to push Mena across the finish line. In doing so, Rutledge guaranteed himself at least a second-place finish. Another driver then pushed Mena's car around the track so Mena could celebrate his victory lap. As far as anyone knew, it was the first time (and perhaps the last) in the history of Tampa auto racing that the winning car was pushed to the checkered flag by a competing stock car.

As the season went on, the events staged by Dery kept local racing fans pouring in. They couldn't wait to see what would happen next. Whether it was Jim Alvis smashing into the wall on the number three turn at Phillips Field, or another

driver knocking down a goal post, the fans enjoyed seeing the action and listening to Gordon's occasional live coverage. When Dery added a late model feature race on July 23, more than 4,200 fans bought tickets to watch the skills of drivers like Walt Craver, Roy Dunning, Larry Brazil, Dave Scarborough, Dick Hope and Will Cagle.

The racing publicity from Gordon continued with catchy ads like, "For a night of action, thrills, chills, and spills, for the entire family … be sure to see the stock car races tonight at Phillips Field," and, "Watch drivers turn their cars into murderous masses of mangled metal tonight at Phillips Field."

Smack dab in the middle of the racing season, Gordon's ex-wife, Betty, dropped a bombshell on him. She decided to marry a man named Ray Locke and move to Bloomington, Illinois, and she would take Pam and Jonard with them. Gordon was upset and concerned that his children were going to be more than 1,200 miles away. However, he had heard that Ray was an upstanding citizen with an

executive job, and would give the children a proper upbringing. Moreover, Gordon remembered being told repeatedly during his own childhood that the environmental parents were much more important than the biological parents. He promised his children he would stop by before they left town. With an aching heart, he made a decision that would haunt him for the rest of his life. As Pam and Jonard walked out the door for the ride to the airport, Gordon called to say goodbye, and to remind them that he would always love them.

As another chapter of his life closed, a new one opened, one which included an instant family. On September 16, 1961, Gordon married Eileen Thibaut Buda, and became the new stepfather to Danise, Greg and Eric. The following month, he went to court and legally changed his name from Jonard Pierre Sjoblom to Gordon Terrance Solie. He officially had a new name. The middle name, Terrance, was a reminder of Gordon's lost love, Terry, from the Thrillcade tour.

Gordon threw himself into his work and tried to please the fans with exciting sports action, including a performance by Dan Fleenor's Hurricane Hell Drivers. Going into the first turn at Plant Field, Fleenor flipped a car and rolled over three times. The roll bars took the brunt of the impact, and he was strapped in, so Fleenor wasn't injured during the unexpected crash. According to Gordon's recap, Johnny Roberts, the show clown, was not as fortunate. He was lying on the floor in the back of the auto, and was tossed around inside the car like a bag of potatoes. Roberts was in a lot of pain, but he finished his events for the day before heading to the nearest hospital.

The legal name change and new family didn't change Gordon's goals. He continued his vigorous efforts to promote wrestling and racing. Although the regular stock car racing season came to an end, Frank Dery's calendar wasn't empty. He had a special race planned for November 12. It was called the First Annual Florida "Century" 100-Lap Stock Car Race. Gordon, however, thought it

would be nice to squeeze in one additional racing card. He came up with an idea to set a special day aside and call it "Pete Folse Day." Folse had been the reigning International Motor Contest Association (IMCA) champion for three years running, and was an extremely popular Tampa chauffeur. With a push from Frank Dery, "Pete Folse Day" became a reality on October 29, 1961. Mayor Julian Lane was on hand, along with Ybor City's Alcade [Mayor] Armando Valdez, and local merchants showered Folse with gifts. Al Sweeney, acting president of National Speedways, Inc., presented Pete Folse with a check and a trophy for the IMCA title.

Preparations began for the 100-lap stock car race, which included the buildup from Gordon. Ads and stories about the upcoming race flourished in Tampa: "Al Ackerman Enters 1961 Dodge Lancer," "Cush Revette enters 55' Chevy that he built himself," and "Dick Hope enters 1960 Chevy previously owned by Daniels Racing Team from Winter Haven." The race was billed with another

new twist for fans. It was going to be a non-stop race. Wrecked cars would be towed away or shoved into the pit areas, while drivers continued to move under the caution of yellow flags.

With no stops during the race, it was extremely hard on equipment. The wheels from four cars literally separated from the axles on the half-mile clay track. "Little Jack" Arnold, who won a super-modified feature the month before, saw smoke billowing out of his hood in the 98th lap of the late model spectacular. His engine seized up before he had an opportunity to reach the finish line. Arnold commented on his nickname and said, "The 'Little Jack' part of my name in stock car racing came from Gordon Solie. Gordon used to announce our names before the feature races, and he kept introducing me as 'Little Jack' Arnold. That nickname stayed with me through my career in stock car racing."

The race came down to two drivers who played cat and mouse during 25 out of 100 laps that were

run under caution. Gordon's press coverage mentioned that every time one of seven caution flags came out, Will Cagle caught up to Dick Hope. In-between flags, and towards the end of the race, Hope pulled away and captured the winning purse. That race closed out the year of racing for Dery Sports Promotions.

The success of the "Century" 100 Lap program, combined with other events at the fairgrounds in the second half of 1961, turned Frank Dery into a credible racing promoter. Prior to that, Dery had owned stock cars driven at Speedway Park, Plant Field and Phillips Field by people like Al Keller, the NASCAR Grand National and Indy 500 veteran. In his first year as a promoter, Dery had between 3,000 and 6,000 paid admissions at his racing cards. That was very good attendance for small racetrack events, and the press responded with more coverage than similar racing events in previous years. The media, which had begun to take notice of racing events, got an extra push from Gordon. While Dery utilized his clout and money,

Gordon worked the newspapers, radio stations, and television stations, and, whenever possible, called the action over the tracks' PA systems.

Already touted for his radio broadcasting and outdoor announcing, Gordon hit a couple of new bench marks in 1961. First, he proved to Frank Dery that he was a proficient publicity man, as well as a gifted announcer for stock car racing. Second, Gordon proved to Cowboy Luttrall that he was the best man to host the televised program Championship Wrestling from Florida [CWF]. Luttrall had been searching for the right announcer ever since he first signed a deal to air programs on Tampa's WTVT CH 13. Originally, Cowboy tried to comply with WTVT's wish to have one of its own staff broadcasters act as host for the wrestling program. Although Gordon's face was seen on CWF late in 1960, he didn't take over as the permanent host until Luttrall tried some WTVT announcers, including a popular local TV personality named "Salty" Sol Fleischman. Fleischman had been associated with WTVT since

1957, but he was unwilling to deal with the antics of wrestlers like the Von Brauners, the hated "German" tag team. Fleischman parted quickly with the televised wrestling program.

Many years later, wrestling fans would refer to Gordon Solie as "The Dean of Wrestling Announcers," which set up an unintended, but interesting, parallel between Gordon and Fleischman, who had been known as "The Dean of Florida Sportscasters."

Mike Graham was a young boy when he went to Phillips Field in 1961 with his dad, Eddie, to watch the stock car races. When Eddie heard Gordon's voice describing the cars on the oval, he turned to Mike and said, "That's who should be announcing the televised wrestling matches." "Cowboy" Luttrall, the "father of televised wrestling in Florida," was smart enough to agree with Eddie, and Gordon found himself back on television. Besides recommending Gordon for the position, Eddie climbed into the ring with Gordon

to demonstrate various wrestling holds, and gave Gordon some direction for the play-by-play. According to Mike Graham, his dad told Gordon to "call the matches as if you were narrating for a group of blind people."

Earning the job on Championship Wrestling from Florida presented another challenge to Gordon. Early in his second stint as host for the show, Gordon had an overseer, a kind of babysitter appointed by the TV station. On one normal taping day at the WTVT studio, fans stretched all the way down the block as they waited in line in the hot Florida sun, and then packed themselves like sardines into the small studio. With the assistance of their "heel" manager, Saul Weingeroff, Kurt and Karl von Brauner won a tag team match. Saul had a habit of cheating by reaching into the ring with his cane and tripping their opponents. The fans screamed their disapproval of his dirty tactics. In response to the jeers emanating from the audience, the so-called "Germans" unfolded an American flag and spread it on the ring mat. The fans got

louder and more insulting. Basically telling the fans, "Up yours," the Von Brauners proceeded to desecrate the American flag by jumping up and down on it. The louder the fans got, the more Saul Weingeroff egged on the Von Brauners. The fans in the studio were ready to riot.

After the police restored order, the studio manager made a beeline for WTVT's office and marched in to see the station manager. "This has gone too far," he wailed to his superior. "The people who come in to watch are rude, crude and profane. They are disgusting. And those wrestlers, they are a disgrace with their anti-American, pro German antics. Something has to be done."

During the negotiations which followed between Luttrall and WTVT officials, it was decided that a station representative named Russ Benedict would be present on the air with Gordon until further notice. Russ was a man with broadcasting experience, but no knowledge whatsoever about professional wrestling. He was the new station

watchdog and Gordon's co-host. Russ said that despite the situation during his short tenure as a wrestling co-host, Gordon was extremely helpful and shared much information about the wrestlers and related terminology.

Even though Russ was temporarily on the show, WTVT still wasn't satisfied. Jerry Prater came to Tampa in January 1957 as a cameraman for WTVT, and over the next couple of years, he phased into directing assignments. "When Cowboy and Eddie decided they wanted to put wrestling on TV, they brought Gordon along," stated Jerry. "At first, Channel 13 management wanted a staff announcer to do the commentary, but it turned out Gordon was the only one who could keep his cool when the excitement peaked. Maybe that's because he was clued in on what to expect, but for whatever reason, he could do it up right. Of course, I drew the directing assignment and found Gordon exceptionally easy to work with, quite unlike some TV 'talent' with major ego problems."

"The first major change," added Jerry, "was getting the show out of Channel 13's studios. It took a lot of work to clean up the studios after a show because the fans really messed up the place. They were hardcore wrestling fans who got into the studio wrestling matches for free because WTVT wouldn't allow an admission charge. Cowboy was persuaded to purchase the Sportatorium in late 1961, and we used 13's mobile unit and microwaved the signal back to the station for recording. In TV, some shows you do because you're assigned, but working the wrestling show with Gordon was pure pleasure … at least most of the time. He was a real pro and very adaptable."

Moving the studio shows to the Sportatorium also allowed Gordon to host the wrestling program by himself with minimal interference from the television station.

Dick Steinborn remembered wrestling in Tampa when Gordon was just beginning as the television

host. "Gordon was green as a television broadcaster when I first met him, but he had a voice that was captivating, and he was a natural. Since I was also a musician, Cowboy Luttrall and my dad, Milo, asked me to go into the ring prior to a card at the Spartan Auditorium (University of Tampa) and play the National Anthem. I entered the ring in my wrestling gear with my violin and started to play. After I finished the first stanza, my mind went blank and I couldn't think of the second stanza. So, I started over and played the first stanza again. When I finished, Gordon started to hum the second stanza under his breath. Gordon was in the ring with a microphone and evidently thought that I would forget the second stanza again. It didn't matter. I just followed Gordon's humming and finished the song."

Wrestling's faithful followers watched Gordon on television every week. They tried to imitate his voice, and they communicated with him via fan mail. A couple of days after the "Century" race, Gordon heard from an old friend, Kenneth Vennett,

principal of Tampa's Oak Grove Middle School. Ken thanked Gordon for bringing wrestlers Eddie Graham and Dick Steinborn to the school. Vennett was pleased by the response from students in regard to the wrestlers' remarks about clean living and physical well-being. He was not pleased, however, with a Tampa Tribune writer named Neil Meffert, who made a bit of a mockery of the wrestlers' visit. The press had used the visit as another opportunity to poke fun at professional wrestling. Kenneth Vennett also complained to the Tribune about a rumor stating that Vennett was not happy with the grapplers. As far as Vennett was concerned, nothing was further from the truth. He referenced the plan for physical fitness set up by President John F. Kennedy, the kindness of the wrestlers to donate their time, and the positive role models set by both men in regard to physical fitness. Gordon replied that he appreciated the support from Vennett, and he wasn't deterred for a second by the insults from the press.

Gordon began working behind closed doors on a

new deal with Frank Dery. It was Dery's opinion at the time that the real money in stock car racing was made by the promoters. That was the reason why he leased the tracks at the Fairgrounds, and why he subsequently bought 40 acres off Fowler Ave in Tampa. Frank planned to take his good business sense and build his own racetrack. By trade, he was actually a wholesale florist, although he certainly didn't look the part. He looked more like the foreman in charge of a group of dock workers. It took considerable effort for somebody to get Dery to smile, and he normally came across as being gruff. In his effort to construct a new oval track, he consulted with insurance companies and his experienced racing advisor, Gordon Solie.

The first obstacle came when the project was rejected by the Hillsborough County Planning Commission. Undeterred, the promoter and his public-relations man successfully appealed at the next county board meeting and 18 of Dery's 40 acres were re-zoned to permit the construction of a new speedway. On February 1, 1962, government

officials attended a ground-breaking ceremony for Golden Gate Speedway and Sports Mecca. Mr. and Mrs. Frank Dery, Ray Knopke, Ellsworth Simmons, Roy Haynes, Bill Harkness, and Rudy Rodriguez were in attendance.

Critics sounded off almost immediately with claims that Frank Dery and Gordon Solie were chasing the wrong dream. With races at the Fairgrounds in Tampa, and at Sunshine Speedway in St. Petersburg, opponents claimed that another track just wouldn't get any business. Some of the drivers expected low purses to begin with at the new track, and they didn't believe the new speedway would be able to fill the divisions with enough competitors. Ignoring all the criticism, Dery and Solie proceeded to supervise construction of the new track during the next few months, and then began to inform the public.

"Golden Gate Speedway & Sports Mecca Nears Completion" was the headline for one of Gordon's promos in the Tampa newspapers. Another read,

"Dery plans to run jalopies and late model stock cars each Friday night & sportsman and super-modifieds on Saturday night. There will be occasional Sunday afternoon races incorporating sprint cars, midgets, motorcycles along with the regular menu of stocks."

Tampa Tribune sportswriter Bob Smith added a few more details:

> Spectators are protected by a steel reinforced concrete retaining wall and a "wheel" fence similar to the one in front of the grandstands at Daytona International Speedway. The covered grandstand itself follows the Daytona design and was erected by the same company. The pits are on the opposite side of the track from the grandstand and will have a small grandstand for mechanics and drivers. It is paved, well lighted, and has water and electricity for the race crews. (5C)

Frank Dery and Gordon saw enough race tracks previously to know they not only wanted one of the fastest 1/3-mile tracks in the country, they also wanted one of the safest. In addition, they wanted the complex to be beautiful, so Dery had 1,500 flowers and 30 palm trees planted between the track wall and the walkway. One of the construction workers at the track said he couldn't wait to watch the races on opening night. His wife, however, didn't care much for stock car races. She wanted to go to Golden Gate Speedway so she could see the pretty plants and flowers. The landscaping surrounding the new track earned Golden Gate Speedway a nickname as "The Garden Spot of Racing."

On May 6, 1962, Gordon and Eileen (nicknamed "Smoky" and affectionately called "Smoke" by Gordon) Solie held a cocktail party at their home on Culbreath Avenue in Tampa to honor Mr. and Mrs. Frank Dery and the upcoming grand opening of the speedway. The Derys were the principal stock holders, with each owning two shares, and

Gordon owning one share.

For a little icing on the cake, Gordon advertised the fact that Golden Gate Speedway was the new spring training headquarters for Danny Fleenor's Hurricane Hell Auto Drivers Thrill Show, and the official test site for the Olin Mott Tire Company. Despite all the good publicity, however, many voices in the racing community still expressed their doubts about a third racing site in the Tampa area. Joe Rodriguez, who held the lease at the Fairgrounds, was averaging only 700 fans per show, while Sunshine Speedway in St. Petersburg was drawing 1,500 to 2,000 people a night on weekends.

As opening day approached, the headlines read "Golden Gate Speedway Opens Tomorrow with the Fastest in Stock Car Racing." The promotional piece below the headline was written by Gordon and read:

The track surface, made of a new type of asphalt, will be 50 feet wide and the turns will be 60 feet wide. The extra wide track is designed to eliminate the "one groove" type of racing. The turns have been banked to five feet with special engineering to enable drivers to pass both on the straight-aways and on the turns. Action is the key word at Golden Gate Speedway.

On opening day, May 12, 1962, both Dery and Gordon were getting their share of ink in the local tabloids. Articles abounded about Frank Dery's $276,000 investment in the new racetrack and sports complex. In addition to Gordon's publicity and announcing duties at the Golden Gate, the papers released the story that Gordon Solie had been named general manager of Golden Gate Speedway. Gordon was no longer the "backup" announcer" for Dery Sports Promotions, either. He was the only person even considered for broadcasting the action at the new speedway. He was honored further that same day when Alcade

Armando Valdez, Jr. appointed Gordon as "Secretary General of Sports Announcers of Ybor City" (English translation) and gave Gordon an Ybor City Passport.

The day got even better when Golden Gate Speedway opened its doors for the inaugural races. There were only 4,000 seats available, but 5,219 people bought tickets. Highway Patrol officers had to be brought in to help turn away more than 2,000 unhappy fans, and more than 1,000 of the ticket holders had to stand to watch the races.

When the action began on opening night, a young racing enthusiast named Randy Alvarez (Pancho's son) witnessed a hitch in the inaugural races at the new speedway. "Harry, the official starter, not only had a hard time waving the flags, but he also dropped the flags more than once. It was really screwing up the races. Gordon went into the stands and grabbed Johnny Hicks and took him to the starter's position. As soon as Hicks first raised a flag, there was a big cheer from the grandstand and

the races started to flow," said Randy.

Cush Revette entered his #7 Chevy in the late model events at the grand opening and continued his success from the previous year. "I was high point man at Sunshine Speedway in 1961, but I had a falling out with my partner," said Cush. "I decided to go out on my own, so I built a racecar in my backyard. It had a 283 engine and it was punched out as far as it would go. After winning my heat and the semi-final, my fuel tank started leaking. I probably shouldn't have run in the feature race, but I did. Fortunately, the car didn't explode and I won the first late model feature race ever run at Golden Gate Speedway." Cush went on, "I was happy until I got my winnings and Dery handed me a measly hundred bucks. It took me a couple of weeks and I threatened to pull my car from the races, but Dery met with me and finally coughed up some more money."

On the second night, only 4,000 people were allowed to buy tickets, and once again, people

were turned away. Driver Will Cagle spoke about the opening night for the super-modified cars:

"There was a small amount paid for winning the preliminary heats, but there was a $100 payout for winning a semi-final and a $150 up for the feature race. I won my heat, got second in the semi, and took the feature race. I think I got around $286 that night in the super-modified division. It was neat to win the first super-modified feature at Golden Gate Speedway."

Wayne Reutimann, a member of the Reutimann racing family from Zephyrhills, Florida, took the checkered flag for the sportsman feature. His father, Emil Reutimann, and his older brother, Buzzie, were both familiar drivers to fans around the Tampa Bay area. During the second weekend at the "Gate," popular Tampa driver, "Pancho" Alvarez, battled a cantankerous gearshift through two preliminary heats, but went on to win the modified stock car feature race.

The action continued when the "Gate" opened up for business on June 2. Gordon's voice boomed through the crowd as he described the action when a driver named Fred Ohlinger lost his right rear tire and slammed into a retaining wall. On impact, his car exploded into a blaze. The dangerous crash, along with a humorous twist to the story, was detailed in Gordon's press release. Engulfed by flames inside the car, and with both his arms on fire, Ohlinger knew he had to get out or perish. He dove out the car window and fought hard to free himself of his snagged clothing. Once free and on the ground, Ohlinger stood up, only to realize his pants were on fire. Quickly shedding his trousers, Ohlinger ran away from the blazing car wearing a helmet, goggles, shirt, shoes, socks, and underwear. Fred recovered after hospital treatment for second- and third-degree burns.

Due to the early success of Golden Gate Speedway, Leo Musgrave and Bill Cherne, promoters of racing at Sunshine Speedway in St. Petersburg, moved their modifieds and sportsman

events to Friday nights. That way, the field of drivers would be full on Friday nights at Sunshine Speedway, and drivers in those divisions could run again on Saturdays at Golden Gate Speedway. Gordon continued to try and stay one step ahead of other ovals on the Suncoast by arranging for more outside acts. He booked a lady daredevil named the “Human Bomb," and laid out more plans in the newspapers with a typical Solie headline: "Tex Ritter, Roy Acuff in Person Wed. & Thurs. Golden Gate Speedway.”

Hank Morton and the Smoky Mountain Boys joined Ritter and Acuff for a country jamboree at the speedway. Gordon also incorporated a softball game featuring the professional wrestlers to raise money for the Florida Sheriffs Boys Ranch. Right next to the news in the paper about the jamboree, Gordon placed an ad for the June 26, 1962 wrestling card.

Gordon wrote another promotional piece about Art Malone coming to compete at Golden Gate

Speedway. It was well known that Malone held the world speed record, set on a closed track at Daytona International Speedway. Also famous for his drag racing feats, Malone was scheduled to chauffeur a 1960 former NASCAR Ford in his first appearance at the "Gate." The stock car was owned by Jack and Al Lamphier.

Bigger news yet hit racing fans when Gordon's next press release was sent out from Golden Gate Speedway: "Entry blanks for the first NASCAR Grand National late model stock car race to be held at Golden Gate Speedway in Tampa on Sunday, November 11, were mailed to NASCAR drivers last week." It was the first time in history that such an event would take place in Tampa. The 200-lap spectacular was set for November 11, 1962, and was slated to count for point totals for the new NASCAR season, which would begin in the fourth quarter of 1962 and conclude in 1963.

Gordon played a big role, not only in booking the race, but also in getting drivers and publicizing the

event. He went with Frank Dery to Daytona and signed a contract with William France, president of Daytona International Speedway, and Pat Purcell, executive director of NASCAR.

Golden Gate Speedway had quickly become the hot spot of racing on Florida's Suncoast. Even so, attendance at the track dropped to around 3,200 fans per show by September. When interviewed by Tom McEwen for a column in the Tampa Tribune, Dery claimed that football season kept some patrons away, and he knew the Cuban missile crisis was having its impact. Some of the regulars who came from out of town told Frank they weren't comfortable coming anywhere near MacDill Air Force Base at the time. He was thankful that the decrease was only temporary because he needed $15,000 a night to break even.

Crowd size increased again by the end of September 1962 as the regular season was coming to an end, and some changes were instituted at the "Gate." A quarter-page promo written by Gordon

emerged in the Tampa Tribune called, "Sportsman, Super-Modifieds in Separate Races." Because of demands from the Saturday night crowds, Frank Dery made the decision to run sportsman and super-modifieds cars in separate divisions. For a little extra flavor, Gordon added the "championship of the month race." Frank Riddle had won the race for super-modifieds the month before, and was scheduled to defend his title. Henry Montgomery had already claimed the Sportsman championship feature of the month and took home the Olin Mott Tire Co. trophy. As public relations man for the track, Gordon's plan was to give the people what they wanted and encourage the fans to come out to Golden Gate Speedway on Friday and Saturday nights, along with an occasional Sunday-afternoon special event. It was great for the die-hard fans, and there were plenty of die-hards to be found.

Amid all the hoopla of national racing stars coming to Tampa, Golden Gate Speedway took time on October 12 to honor local racing hero

Johnny Hicks. News of the ceremony, along with a short bio on Hicks, was published in National Speed Sport News, along with local articles, including one by Bob Smith of the Tampa Tribune. Fans, owners, drivers, and track personnel paid homage to Johnny for flagging his 6,000th race as a starter. Hicks grew up as a tough lad who raced motorcycles for fun against other boys on Florida's phosphate hills. The trick was to beat an opponent to the top of a large hill, while maintaining enough control to avoid soaring over the peak and flying off the other side. Johnny Hicks' wild side continued in his adult life as he pursued an interest in auto racing. He began by racing stripped-down stocks, which were cars with no bodies or seats. Like the other drivers, Hicks was strapped with ropes to the gas tank of his car to avoid going airborne during a race.

Years later, driving a race car including a body and a seat, Hicks went off the track at Phillips Field and plowed about halfway up a palm tree. It took an hour for rescue workers to get Johnny out

of the wrecked car. After spending 11 months in casts, Johnny began flagging races throughout 13 states on the IMCA circuit. Gordon never regretted his decision to appoint Hicks as the official starter and praised Johnny over the years for saving the lives of countless drivers.

On October 15, 1962, the build-up continued for the upcoming NASCAR Grand National race. Tampa had never seen a media blitz about stock car racing like the one that NASCAR and Gordon put together. Gordon remembered twelve years before, when he opened a daily newspaper in the "Cigar City," and saw an article about lawn tennis on the front page of the sports section, with no mention of stock car racing. Not that he had anything against lawn tennis. After all, thanks to his mother's guidance and Pierre's lifestyle, he had been taught to appreciate some of the finer things in life, things which fell somewhere between upper-middle-class and lower-upper-class America. In Gordon's mind, the issue had always been the injustice of the Tampa media when it came to stock

car racing. That had certainly changed.

News articles and press releases informed the public daily about the NASCAR race entries received for cars and their respective drivers. According to Gordon, the first three entries came in from Junior Johnson (1960 Daytona "500" champion), LeRoy Yarborough (a Daytona 250-mile sportsman winner), and Lewis "Possum" Jones, another driver with NASCAR experience.

Trying to get eligible top-notch NASCAR drivers to enter the Tampa race became a little more complicated when Dery learned that he needed to go to Darlington Raceway in South Carolina to negotiate with some of the drivers. The NASCAR drivers were scheduled to race next at the Darlington track, and it would be an opportunity to convince more of them to enter the race. Dery and Gordon both went to Darlington for some wheeling-and-dealing with top notch chauffeurs and managed to acquire more entries. Ned Jarrett, the 1961 Grand National series

champion, hadn't planned to race in Tampa due to an out-of-town commitment on the day before the race. However, after speaking with Gordon in Darlington, Ned agreed to arrive in Tampa on Sunday morning and go for some points in the NASCAR 200-lapper.

Upon his return to Florida, Gordon updated the media with Golden Gate Speedway press releases: "The latest entry to be received was that of the famed 'Fireball' Roberts. Roberts was the high money winner for the 1962 season and is the most colorful racer in the late model division. He is known as 'Mr. NASCAR' himself. Roberts will once again power the famed 1962 Pontiac that has won him the pole position in virtually every race that he has entered. Atlanta '400' winner, Rex White, is another favorite in the Tampa Grand National. White, a slightly built, lead-footed chauffer, began his racing career in Tampa years ago at the now defunct Speedway Park."

Tom McEwen, sports editor for the Tampa

Tribune, added his expertise in an article called, "A $56,000 ‘Hobby,’" as he wrote about the reigning NASCAR Grand National champion, Joe Weatherly. According to McEwen, Weatherly was "a driver by occupation, but a pilot by hobby" (n. pag.). Originally, it was a different story because Weatherly drove race cars as a hobby. His $56,000 of winnings during the ‘62 circuit enabled Joe to race for a living and to fly from race to race. Weatherly was definitely considered one of the favorites for the 200-lapper at Golden Gate.

In addition to covering the sports scene, McEwen had a couple of additional bonds with Gordon. First, and probably most important, they were friends. Second, Tom had become a writing mentor for Gordon. It was not uncommon for Gordon to pop into McEwen’s office at the Tribune, or meet for lunch while seeking advice for an article or promotional piece. When Milt Spencer got married, both Tom and Gordon claimed they should be the best man. Milt agreed and had both men stand up for him on the big day.

One of the local favorites, Buzzie Reutimann, was granted an entry to run with the NASCAR drivers and spoke about the opportunity, “Gordon was largely responsible for my position in the Grand National race. He went to Frank Dery and suggested that I compete as a local driver. Dery agreed and scheduled me to drive his #22A 1960 Chevy Impala.”

More excitement was generated as Gordon continued to advertise new entries: "Marvin Panch, another top veteran driver of NASCAR, will drive either a ‘62 Chevy or a ‘62 Ford. A famous racing team of father and son, Buck and Buddy Baker, of Charlotte, NC, will race their Chrysler ‘300’ sedans on the third-mile oval. Dick and Lee Petty, perhaps the most famous racing team in NASCAR, will drive their 1962 Plymouths in the Tampa go." The Pettys also entered a third driver, Jim Paschal, who had garnered attention for winning the opening-day race for the Grand National series on November 4, 1962 at Birmingham.

Frank Dery added 2,000 bleacher seats in the fenced area designated for fans, increasing the capacity to 6,000, and with NASCAR's name value and Gordon's publicity, every one of the seats at Golden Gate Speedway was filled for the race. On the oval that day, the crowd was treated to a battle between names like Rex White, Richard and Maurice Petty, Buck Baker, Joe Weatherly, and "Fireball" Roberts. It took some fancy maneuvering, but the Petty team came up big when Richard Petty and Jim Paschal finished first and second, respectively. Tampa fans were especially happy to see Buzzie Reutimann turn in a respectable performance.

Buzzie said he was extremely nervous prior to the Grand National race. "I didn't want to look like a fool, and I didn't want to run into any of the NASCAR guys and mess up their deal. I decided to keep a low profile and just race. At the end of the race, I was in the top ten."

Results from the NASCAR race in Tampa put

Golden Gate Speedway on the map. The headline released in Ridgewood, New Jersey, by National Speed Sport News read: "Richard Petty's Plymouth Takes Tampa Grand Nat'l."

Besides the national buzz about the race, big spreads appeared locally in the Tampa Times, the St. Petersburg Times, and the Tampa Tribune. On the front page of the sports section, the Tampa Tribune had a picture of Richard Petty receiving a victory kiss from Linda Herndon, the trophy girl at Golden Gate Speedway. On page two of the same section, Gordon ran an ad: "Wrestling Armory Veterans' Day Special Tonight 8:30 P.M." The Southern wrestling title was up for grabs and Don Curtis was set to challenge the Great Malenko, one of wrestling's meanest "bad guys." The Fabulous Kangaroos and their manager, "Wild" Red Berry, were pictured in the same ad by Gordon, and were to appear that night on the same card.

Wrestling hadn't drawn as much attention as racing in Tampa, but it was gaining in popularity. It

wasn’t always positive attention because the media liked to poke fun at pro wrestling, and due to his high profile, Gordon was becoming one of their main targets. The Mayport Mirror ran a column by King Kelley covering bits from various sports including baseball, fishing, boxing, cycling and a paragraph about professional wrestling:

> Incidentally, if you want a good chuckle, catch Tampa’s Gordon Solie’s Saturday wrestling telecast. He uses such phrases as, "the referee broke up what could have been a very disastrous situation," "and wreaked his revenge," along with such silly words as "chastised." (“All in Sport”)

Poking fun at Gordon and wrestling didn’t change the fact that he was the only syndicated TV personality in Tampa at the time. Championship Wrestling from Florida was seen on television from Atlanta, Georgia down to Miami, Florida.

Kelley was only one of many reporters who used Gordon and pro wrestling as a source of humor.

Gordon took the wrestling business seriously, just like Luttrall told him to, and there were journalists who appreciated Gordon's prowess with a microphone. Mike Mooneyham has written about wrestling for three decades in a column for the Charleston Post and Courier, and also co-authored a New York Times best-selling book on pro wrestling. He shared his opinion about Gordon's talent in describing the action for the grapplers:

"Gordon was a living encyclopedia on the sport, and he single-handedly put words and catch-phrases into the pro wrestling lexicon. In addition to lending an air of athletic legitimacy to the mayhem, he helped convey an up-close and personal image to the viewers. When the action got out of hand; 'pandemonium had broken loose in the squared circle.' When a wrestler bled, his battered face was colorfully described as a 'crimson mask.'

There also were ‘pier-six brawls’ and ‘high, vertical suplexes’ (pronounced soo-plays).”

"With Gordon," claimed Mike, "you not only got a wrestling match, but an anatomy lesson, as well. He was an expert in describing the role that the parts of the human body played in the match. A wrestler ‘applied pressure to the prefrontal lobe.’ A sleeper hold ‘cut off the blood supply to the carotid artery.’ Gordon actually took courses and studied medical books to give wrestling fans a weekly anatomy lesson along with their wrestling matches.”

When an announcer from out west had a chance to speak with Gordon, the man said Gordon’s style of broadcasting would never work in his part of the country. Out there, they spoke to the audience as if the viewers all had the intelligence of a 12-year-old child. Gordon, on the other hand, insisted on addressing his audience as if they all had intelligence equal to, or greater than, his own.

J Michael Kenyon chimes in on one of the urban legends surrounding Gordon's contributions to the sport. "Gordon has been attributed to having created clichés like "crimson mask" and "Pier Six brawl." However, both of those hackneyed phrases were part and parcel of nearly every wire-service account of every bloody boxing match from the 1920s on … and young Jonard Sjoblom would have grown up reading them on sports pages from his grade school days."

Gordon Solie was building credibility as a television broadcaster, in spite of the critics. This was somewhat of a new trend for wrestling announcers because most of them acted more like carnies. Crude or silly behavior was not uncommon for wrestling hosts. Gordon made mention of one announcer who had cigarettes dangling from his nostrils during the program. The exception, according to Gordon, was Richard "Dick" Lane, who did wrestling telecasts at ringside in Los Angeles' Olympic Auditorium beginning in 1946. Lane is credited with being the

first person to utter "Whoooaaa, Nellie!" Football fans have heard Keith Jackson use the same term in his football commentary, but he always credits Dick Lane with the idea. By the early sixties, Lane was well known for both his play by play of wrestling and roller derby. In fact, he received around a thousand pieces of fan mail every week. Gordon said he heard the terms “crimson mask" and "pier-six-brawl" while listening to Dick Lane’s broadcasts. Gordon’s admission that he didn’t originate either of those expressions is true, but it should be noted that he turned the clichés into household words during his career.

Gordon’s tax returns for 1962 revealed that he received more than $4,000 from professional wrestling and a similar amount for managing Golden Gate Speedway. While the majority of wrestling income came from Luttrall’s Deep South Sports, $250 was paid from L&G [Luttrall and Graham] Development Company, which was located at 106 North Albany.

Gordon was on a roll both at work and at home by the close of 1962. His publicity and announcing for racing had paid dividends and he was beginning to draw some attention to Tampa wrestling. His new family all shared the name "Solie" because he went to the courts and adopted Danise, Greg, and Eric. Overall, as he approached his 34th birthday, life was good for Gordon Solie. Well ... other than the "rules of engagement," as Gordon called them. He never had a high opinion of the institution of marriage, and Smoky was as close to the ideal partner as he had ever known, but even the new marriage had its price. Smoky was willing to put up with his strange hours, his drinking, and other imperfections, but she insisted there was to be no mention of Gordon's biological children, nor pictures of them visible in the house.

Gordon's daughter, Pam, said she only saw her dad a couple of times over the next eight years. "My mom and stepfather, Ray, made arrangements while on vacation to meet with my dad at a Tampa pancake house," Pam recalled. "I remember sitting

in a booth with my dad. Smoky sat in a booth behind us, and my mom and Ray were seated within earshot. That was strange, as well, because at the time, I had no idea who Smoky was. I just thought she was some lady sitting in another booth at the same restaurant, and didn't realize the lady was my dad's new wife. I was preprogrammed for the visitations because my mother insisted that I ask questions to Dad such as, 'Mom wants to know … when are you going to send the support checks?' While it was wonderful to see my dad, it would have been much more enjoyable without the other adults around."

For Gordon, it was simply a continuation of the "fragmented relationships" that seemed to plague him throughout his life.

Chapter 4: Wimpy Beats Pancho

Cowboy Luttrall and Gordon (back) oversee contract signing between Danny Hodge and Hiro Matsuda

Big racing news hit the Tampa newspapers on January 19, 1963 when a new racing corporation, Suncoast Speedways, Inc, was formed to handle the promotion for three racetracks. Gordon Solie

was appointed president and the man responsible for all publicity and promotion at the various speedways, while Frank Dery was vice president. In addition to his appointment as the new general manager for Sunshine Speedway in St. Petersburg, Jack Lamphier was named secretary. According to Al Cohn of the St. Petersburg Times, Leo Musgrave, owner/operator of Sunshine Speedway, agreed to step down and consented to a percentage for his ownership. Houston Herndon, who promoted racing in Sarasota and Bradenton, Florida, was the treasurer for the new company.

More racing highlights were revealed when Gordon advertised a show called the "Thrill-O-Rama," a two-hour program in front of the grandstands at the Florida State Fair on February 5, 1963. Dan Fleenor booked Nashville country-music stars Carl Smith, Kitty Wells, Johnnie and Jack, along with Bill Phillips and the Tennesseans. One of the special features was a 19-year-old daredevil named Freddie Fisher who flew 65 feet through the air in a 1963 Dodge Dart convertible.

To top things off, NASCAR was coming back to town, only this time with the midget sprint cars.

In typical Solie fashion, Gordon advertised the big race: "NASCAR-sanctioned midget sprint cars will roar into action Sunday night at 8:30 p.m. on the third-mile banked asphalt of Golden Gate Speedway on East Fowler Ave. Track president, Frank Dery, reports that the field of midget sprinters will be the largest ever assembled in Tampa."

Gordon made the announcement that Jigger Sirois had entered a Ford-powered car in the upcoming NASCAR race at Golden Gate. Sirois garnered plenty of attention after he was declared the 1959 CSRA (Central States Racing Association) rookie of the year and won the 1961 UARA (United Auto Racing Association) championship. Jim Florian, three-time NASCAR midget champ, was slated to join the competition, along with drivers from Illinois, Missouri, Florida, New York, and elsewhere. In the end, three other names captured

the top slots in the big race at the "Gate." Woody Huntington from Milroy, Indiana, took the checkered flag, followed by Russ Swedler of Joliet, Illinois, and Willie Wildhaver from Pontiac, Michigan.

With the popularity of racing in Tampa at the time, locals were alarmed to hear that Gordon was resigning his position as general manager of Golden Gate Speedway. They were relieved, however, to learn that his title, not his role, was the only real change. For business purposes, Gordon was chosen as vice president of Dery Sports Promotions, in lieu of the GM position, and would continue as the head of Suncoast Speedways.

Even with all the success, the racing business was not free of problems for Dery and Solie. As the second regular season approached, it was rumored that a large percentage of the drivers were making plans to boycott Golden Gate Speedway. They thought the purses weren’t high enough

because Dery was trying to pay off his track debt too quickly. Some were upset because the super-modifieds division had been eliminated. Gordon told Wayne Shufelt of the Tampa Times that there weren't enough super-modifieds showing up each week to put on a good race. He didn't think it was fair that fans in attendance should have to watch a race with only nine or ten cars. A small field of cars like that really wasn't entertaining.

Shufelt explained that Golden Gate mixed races in 1962, and hoped some of the sportsman cars would convert to modifieds. Due to the expense involved, it never happened. The 1962 season witnessed ten late models, seven sportsman cars, and more than 50 Class B jalopies built, in comparison to only two newly constructed super-modifieds ("No More").

Dery insisted the remaining divisions would be full at race time, despite the apparent gripes around town.

Before the regular season began for the local drivers, however, Frank and Gordon had one more group from across the nation coming to the "Gate." Gordon plastered more promos in the paper, including a headline that began, "Indy Drivers to Vie for Top Honors." The USAC (United States Auto Club) had agreed to a race in Tampa, and some of their drivers who filed entries were veteran Allen Crowe and four-time IMCA sprint car champion Bobby Grim.

Don Branson, the number-four man in USAC at the time, entered the Leader Car 110 Offy Special owned by Roger Ward and Len Sutton. It was the same car he planned to run in the Indy "500." Another entry was Roger McCluskey, a chauffeur known for his world-record performances on both one- and two-mile tracks.

On the day of the big race, it was Chuck Rodee of Speedway City, Indiana, who benefited from another car's mechanical problems. With Rodee in the lead, Mel Kenyon staged a furious charge and

came up from 16th place to the second position. Bobby Grim's machine had been leaking water from its cooling system all over the track, which made the surface pretty slick. Kenyon could never get a good enough bite on the track to pass Rodee and had to settle for runner-up. The win pushed up Rodee's season total to 28½ points and allowed him to overtake the previous leader, a well-known driver by the name of Parnelli Jones.

Once the "Gate" completed the bookings for national circuit races, it was time to concentrate on regular season number two. The rumblings about a drivers' strike turned out to be untrue, so it was business as usual.

Side by side, two stock car promos from Gordon appeared in the Tampa Tribune, and next to those was a recap of a wild night at Fort Homer Hesterly Armory. Richard Petty was in the racing news again for climbing atop the NASCAR standings. A third-place finish at Darlington pushed Petty to 14,688 points, just ahead of Ned Jarrett. Joe

Weatherly won the race at Darlington and ranked third at the time in point standings.

On the local scene, Buzzie Reutimann was establishing a "Chevrolet" take-over at the "Gate," while Pancho Alvarez was trying to change that with a brand new 1959 Pontiac. Cush Revette, who competed against both Buzzie and Pancho, said Gordon made the races at the "Gate" enjoyable for both the drivers and the fans.

"He asked that the drivers unbuckle, get out of their cars, and lean against the front right fenders before we competed in the feature races," stated Revette, "and then Gordon announced our names and made comments about our cars or motors. In my case, Gordon made a big deal because I was seen drinking buttermilk one time. He went on and on about it to the point that I even put a little buttermilk container on the hood of my car before feature races. For a time, I was sponsored by the University Lounge and Restaurant and I invited the fans to meet me there after the races. Because of

Gordon, they actually expected to see me there drinking buttermilk, and seemed surprised to see me drinking a beer. It got to the point that the crowd expected some humorous encounter whenever Gordon introduced me at the track.

"One night, Gordon was at the microphone and yelled at me, 'Hey, Cush, what time is it?' I yelled back from the track, 'It's nookie time. But right now we have to race.' The crowd loved it."

The real pandemonium in town, however, occurred at the time over at the Armory. As "good guys" Eddie Graham, Ray Villmer, and Don Curtis walked down the aisle at the Armory, 3,000 fans rose to their feet and cheered with affection and support. The mood changed in a hurry that May 14th as Kurt and Karl von Brauner made their way to the ring for a six-man tag team match. Boos and insults resounded through the Armory. Then there was quiet anticipation. Manager Saul Weingeroff waited until the last possible moment to introduce the "mystery partner" for the Von Brauners.

Suddenly, out walked the Great Malenko. Outraged, the fans hurled every nasty comment in the book at him. As the match got under way, the voices got louder. During the third fall, with the two teams even at one fall, the Von Brauners and Malenko all entered the ring. To even things out, the three "good guys" followed suit. During the confusion, Malenko pinned Graham for the victory. Police helped the "bad guys" make an exit before the fans could hurt them.

Gordon often said that professional wrestling's soap opera of good versus evil was a lot like real life, and unfortunately, the "good guys" don't always win. Regardless of a wrestler's status as a "good guy" or a "bad guy," Gordon evaluated not only their showmanship, but their wrestling skills and physical attributes, as well. He admired the sheer power of some wrestlers as they picked up an opponent who weighed 250 to 300 pounds, lifted them overhead, and body slammed them to the canvas or hurled them over the ropes and out of the ring.

He also admired the skills of chauffeurs at Golden Gate Speedway, but thought they were hampered at the time because the races were not running as smoothly as they should. In his opinion, Frank Dery was too busy, and that adversely affected the competition at the track. Besides his commercial flower business and his track ownership duties, Dery was trying to direct the races. He also owned a car that competed at Golden Gate Speedway. Under Dery's direction, however, the races were running way too slow and many of the track rules were ignored.

Gordon was powerless to provide assistance during the races because he was in the booth announcing the races. He knew, however, that something needed to change to get things running more smoothly. It was time to be direct, and Gordon told Dery, "None of the drivers like you." Shortly afterward, Frank learned that Pancho Alvarez was done with racing. "I told Frank to eliminate my name from the next race," said Pancho. "I won my last feature race, but it was

two-thirty in the morning by the time we were putting cars away. I was tired of that and I was done." Not long after, Frank asked Pancho if he wanted to work for Golden Gate Speedway and handle the races. Pancho knew Gordon had directed the races as recently as two years earlier and had what it took. It was too much, however, to expect Gordon to take the heat from the drivers, and announce the races, and handle the track publicity. Dery had taken control over the races after Gordon stepped down. Even though Pancho Alvarez respected Frank Dery, and the two had worked successfully together in the past, he was very direct when it came to Dery's attempt as racing director. "Frank was too chicken shit to deal with the drivers," stated Pancho. "It took me a couple of weeks to turn things around. The track usually ran until 11:30 or midnight, and it was just too long. I told Dery that the mind will only endure what your ass will endure. If we started at eight o'clock at night, we needed to be done racing by 10:30 or 11:00 at the latest. After the races finished at night, I encouraged the drivers to hang

around and mingle with the fans. The second Friday, we finished at 11:15, and the next night, we were done at 10:45 P.M. I thought things were improving, and I was surprised when the concession director got in my face and claimed, ‘This shit about finishing early isn’t going to work. I’ve got fried food sitting around.’”

The concessionaire did not expect the response he got from Pancho: "I’m not running a restaurant. Besides, you can freeze the food.”

The next Saturday night, the races finished early, and again, the concession guy approached Pancho and said, "I want to apologize to you.”

"For what?" asked Pancho.

"Well, because the drivers hung out with the fans and signed autographs, we had a record night selling food, and a lot of it was take-out.”

Even the drivers benefited when Pancho took over. Golden Gate had been paying purses of

around $700 on Fridays and $1200 to $1400 on Saturdays, and all of a sudden, there were some nights with bigger payouts.

With a new racing supervisor in place, Gordon advertised a "Triple Speed Show at Speedway Tonight." Along with the novice stock car racers, Danny Fleenor's Hurricane Hell Drivers were scheduled to perform before leaving on their U.S. tour. Dorothy Duncan was favored to win the fourth Powder Puff Derby and take home the WFLA-Radio Dick Clark award. Constantly trying to please the fans, Gordon released a promo with a new wrinkle, "Stock Car Versus Quarter Horse at Golden Gate." Eleven-year-old Millie Hall and her horse named "Wimpy" had previously beaten racing opponents, including a jalopy stock car in a 50-yard drag race. Next, Millie and Wimpy were racing Pancho Alvarez in his 1959 Pontiac Bonneville. Pancho told the other drivers they shouldn't have lost to the horse, and they should have waited for the horse to rear a bit and then floored their machines. Gordon wrote that Pancho

was ready "with whip, 10-gallon hat, western boots, and a firm desire to win." On June 7, Johnny Hicks dropped the starting flag and the race was on. Although Pancho led by a hood length, it was announced that Wimpy beat Pancho by a "nose." Pancho played along and set the stage for the next horse race. Millie and Wimpy sent out a challenge to Dan Jones and his Chevy dragster.

As the season progressed, Gordon continued a deluge of publicity. He let the community know that Marvin Schwartz of Denver, Colorado, was bringing the world's fastest Ford-powered dragster to Sunshine Dragstrip, and they could expect to see him run 195 miles per hour. Across the water, Golden Gate Speedway had 100 drivers and cars ready to smash into each other in a "demolition derby." Drivers had to survive qualifying heats with 20 to 25 cars in each heat. Only eight to ten cars normally survived to reach the feature event. The year before, Chet Rutledge rammed almost every car present, and he was ready to defend his championship.

Gordon's career may have been centered on sports entertainment, but he and his wife, Smoky, both enjoyed attending cultural events as well. In-between the racing and wrestling, the Solies found time to visit Guy Lombardo's Port-O-Call Inn and Country Club. The club opened in early 1963, not long after a bridge was completed to Tierra Verde, just south of St. Petersburg. Leading entertainers like Frank Sinatra, Liberace, and Mel Torme made appearances during the club's inaugural year. Gordon and Smoky heard Burt Bacharach's musical direction and orchestration accompanied by the main attraction, Hollywood screen star, Marlene Dietrich.

Another night out for Gordon and Smoky was a stop at the Don Sherwood's Showboat Dinner Theater in Pinellas Park, Florida. They watched a play called Paris is Out starring Mr. and Mrs. Pat O'Brien. Movie buffs will be familiar with Pat O'Brien, especially for his portrayal of Knute Rockne, the legendary football coach at the University of Notre Dame.

Back on the work front, Gordon was excited about a new event coming up at the "Garden Spot of Racing." Veteran drivers from all over Florida were coming to Tampa for a special championship. Gordon was going to announce time trials on Saturday afternoon, specially scheduled early model races on Saturday night, more time trials on Sunday morning, and the grand finale on Sunday afternoon, the 100-lap Florida Late Model Stock Car Championships.

As usual, Gordon had more than one ad running on the same page. On top was news for Sunshine Speedway's Class B championships on Saturday night, while below that Gordon described the upcoming 100 Lap Championship: "A field of 32 of the finest late model stock cars in the state of Florida will roar into action Sunday afternoon at 2:30 P.M. at Golden Gate Speedway for the first annual Florida State Championships." Gordon loved the words "State Championships." Not only did he get to see top drivers guiding powerful machines around an oval track at dangerously high

speeds, he got to announce the action as it happened. He rattled off the exploits on the track as fast as they occurred, and his announcer's dream voice penetrated the roar of engines and the noise of the crowd. His concentration was on the lead cars, but he had the ability to describe the action throughout the field of cars, without losing focus on the battles up front. Up in the broadcasting box, he also had the freedom to keep a cigarette constantly burning, and occasionally throw a shot of Benedictine into his coffee.

It was evident to Gordon that the variety of events, the high level of competition, his publicity, and the new surge of coverage from the local media, were keeping a lot of seats full at Golden Gate Speedway. He pondered over some of the side benefits of Golden Gate's notoriety, benefits like meeting Bill Morris, owner of Hednesford Hills Raceway in Birmingham, England and one of the country's former national racing champions. While Morris was vacationing in Florida during the inaugural season at the "Gate," he saw one of

Gordon's ads for stock car races. Morris couldn't resist the temptation to check out some American stock car action, so he headed to Golden Gate Speedway. While visiting the "Gate," Morris introduced himself to Gordon and kindled a lifetime of friendship between them.

Another man from England came to the U.S., primarily to visit his sister in Tampa. While in Tampa, the man saw an ad for wrestling at the Armory, and while at the matches, he saw Gordon's ad in the program for racing. His name was Brian Pedley, a race car driver from Litchfield. After visiting both the Armory and the "Gate," Pedley said, "Your racing is cleaner than ours and your wrestling is dirtier" (Klein "Who's Nervous?"). As Gordon's thoughts came back to the task at hand, he handled the introductions and waited for Johnny Hicks to begin the big race.

Dave Scarborough kept the lead from the pole position for the first 25 laps before Dave McInnis floored his '55 Chevy and took the top spot.

Wayne Reutimann followed suit, leaving the pack and staying glued to McInnis' rear bumper for the next 70 laps. Even running most of the race at three-quarters throttle, McInnis was able to lap everyone except Wayne and Buzzie Reutimann.

The race gave a new meaning to the term "hot foot" for a race car driver. Dave McInnis mounted a steel accelerator to his transmission before the race and the heat transferred from the tranny to the pedal to Dave's foot. His foot actually got hot during the race. McInnis stayed calm, and after being dogged by Wayne Reutimann for three quarters of the race, he finally pulled away by four car lengths when Wayne experienced front end problems (Smith 3C). History was made when McInnis crossed the finish line as the first winner of the Florida State Late Model Championships. Brothers Wayne and Buzzie finished second and third respectively, followed by Dave Scarborough and "Little Jack" Arnold.

After the race, Dery reiterated some earlier

comments about the option for Golden Gate Speedway to host a state title in lieu of another date for a NASCAR Grand National race. Although Dery had nothing against NASCAR, he thought his staff could handle a big race at the "Gate" just as well as the personnel that NASCAR sent over for the 200-lapper. After all, Dery had Gordon Solie at the microphone, Johnny Hicks flagging the race, Pancho Alvarez supervising the race, a veteran scorekeeper named Polly Roat, and top drivers from around the state. The decision was made to discontinue NASCAR Grand National races at the "Gate" and continue with the Florida State Late Model Championships on an annual basis. It was noted by Dery when speaking to Bill Blodgett from the Tampa Times that McInnis picked up $937 for 100 laps, which was more money than Petty got the year before for driving 200 laps. No regular drivers at Golden Gate Speedway, however, were going to earn dollars over a season like the top drivers on the NASCAR circuit, but they had full-time jobs and an extra $6,000 to $8,000 from part-time racing

was a great second income. Other reports claimed it was NASCAR officials themselves who made the decision not to run again at Golden Gate Speedway because they wanted to book larger venues. As the glory of the big race began to fade, Gordon emerged in print again.

Unlike the hundreds of articles that Gordon and the media wrote about racing, this one was written about Gordon and his wrestling broadcasting. The "TV Personality Parade" devoted a full-page story about Gordon, referring to him as the "Golden Voice of Wrestling." The story described his commentary: "Solie has the rare ability to raise to a fever pitch the interest of radio and television fans with his vivid explanation of ring activities." It was Gordon receiving the attention, more so than professional wrestling, but in his mind, it was a start. At least wrestling was getting some media coverage. The article also gave Gordon a chance to mention that he considered some of the wrestlers, Eddie Graham, Don Curtis and Joe Scarpa (later known as Jay Strongbow), as friends.

It was becoming even more apparent to radio and TV audiences that Gordon Solie was in a different league than other announcers. He used sophisticated words from his extensive vocabulary, he knew all the wrestling holds, he had a unique understanding of human anatomy, and delivered all that knowledge through an incredible voice. His expertise and professionalism were a significant part of the highlights on Championship Wrestling from Florida.

His voice was natural. His vocabulary was begun by his mother as a youngster, and enhanced when Gordon learned a new word every day for years. "The forearm smash was delivered with alacrity," bellowed Gordon to the listeners. Jody Hamilton, who wrestled as the masked Assassin, remembered watching Gordon in the ring with John Heath and Eddie Graham. He said Gordon learned the pressure points and the places on the human body where wrestlers felt pain from various holds. Then Gordon went out and bought a medical book and mastered human anatomy. "Gordon was

inquisitive," stated Jody. "He was a perfectionist who wanted to know everything about the wrestling business." Jody went on, "I've been asked a thousand times about the best announcer I've worked with in professional wrestling. I'd have to say it was Gordon because he knew more about his product than anyone else."

In further conversation, Jody said Gordon was able to change gears in an interview, and had the ability to go into a different mode or direction to make the discussion entertaining. "If there was a lull in a match," claimed Jody, "Gordon picked up the tone or tempo with his commentary to maintain viewers' interest, and the fans were unaware of what he was doing. When the action picked up again, Gordon toned it down. He also made sure it wasn't the 'Gordon Solie Show' because he put the emphasis on the wrestlers."

Attention was turned away from sports entertainment as citizens of Tampa lined the streets, cheering and clapping, on Monday,

November 18, 1963. The man featured in the motorcade was loved throughout the country, but only known to most people through the media. His name was John F. Kennedy, and he was the President of the United States of America. Residents of Tampa felt closer to the “larger than life" President as he rode by and waved. Four days later, the same folks were filled with dismay and disbelief when they heard that President Kennedy had been shot and killed by an assassin. America was in shock.

Gordon kept the front page of the Tampa Times from the day of the shooting. Since the Tampa Times was an afternoon/early evening edition, they were able to feature coverage of the story on the same day it occurred: November 22, 1963. The article, called “Shot to Death by Hidden Assassin," mentioned that while President Kennedy was in Tampa, he made a stop to deliver a speech to “State Chamber of Commerce members at Fort Hesterly Armory" (1A). On page 15-A of the same section, there was a small article about

the King High School band. They were one of two bands in Florida invited to the New York World's Fair, and the teenagers needed donations to make the trip. Two sponsors offered assistance immediately: the Ybor City Lions Club and Cowboy Luttrall. Although it was not disclosed in the article, Cowboy paid for WTVT to produce music and a commercial for the band, and even ran the commercial on Championship Wrestling from Florida.

Although Luttrall came across as a tough man who drank and cussed, he had a soft spot for the youth in the community. He had been raising money for a few years for the Florida Sheriffs Youth Ranch, and he had shown concern for children when school was not in session. During the summer months, Cowboy often made announcements that children could come to the Sportatorium studio wrestling matches free of charge as long as they were accompanied by an adult. Cowboy felt that children who stayed active in supervised activities would stay away from

trouble. He set the example by giving back to the community and expected the wrestlers to do the same.

Always on the search for new entertainment, Gordon took on another racing project. He learned of a track in Anderson, Indiana, which drew 6,000 fans a week, primarily because of figure 8 stock car races, so he hopped on a plane and went to Sun Valley Speedway. The only difference he saw in the track was an "X" in the middle of the oval. Drivers ran on part of the normal oval, and then cut diagonally on the "X" from one turn straight to another, and so forth. After they ran for a while, the race got more interesting as drivers coming from different directions tried to speed through the intersection at the middle of the "X" without crashing into one another. Gordon thought it would be a great addition to Tampa Bay stock car racing, and upon his return, he authorized an expenditure of $10,000 to pave an "X" inside the oval at Sunshine Speedway. This was another example of Gordon's contributions to stock car racing. Before

he introduced figure-8 racing to St. Petersburg, the closest track to Florida offering the same event was in Tennessee.

As if his duties in racing and wrestling were not enough, Gordon took on a column about auto racing in a start-up newspaper called the Temple Terrace Times.

To add more on his plate, Gordon was making preparations for the Babe Zaharias Sports Week Fund. Gordon had been recruited as chairman to help raise money for the American Cancer Society. Originally, Gordon met Mildred "Babe" Zaharias at her home in Tampa when he tagged along with wrestler Frankie Cain. Frankie had agreed to visit and share his special soup recipe and cooking skills with Babe and her husband, retired wrestler George Zaharias. He said Gordon was grateful for the opportunity to meet Babe, the lady known to the world as the "Greatest Female Athlete of the First Half of the Century." Before marrying George, she was known as Babe Didrikson.

Babe won Olympic gold medals in the javelin and hurdles, became America's premier lady golf celebrity, and by 1950, had won every golf tournament available. Paul Hemphill from the Tampa Times wrote that Babe realized there was a need to raise money for cancer research when she was going through treatment for the disease in 1956. She held a meeting in her home to kick things off and had attendees like boxing great Jack Dempsey, Cowboy Luttrall, and the reigning Tampa Mayor, Curtis Hixon.

"Later, in the same year," wrote J Michael Kenyon, "National Wrestling Alliance president Sam Muchnick tried to dun the entire NWA membership into making contributions, and he actually spent two or three issues trying to shame his members into giving something. Finally, about twenty percent of the offices responded … among them, of course, the Tampa-based Cowboy Luttrall promotion." This is how the late-1956 pitch was made to NWA members:

(NWA Bulletin No. 3, November 16, 1956) (excerpt) "It is the president's suggestion that each office ask all wrestlers to donate one dollar (each) to the Babe Didrikson Zaharias cancer fund. After this money is collected, send the money to this office with the names of all donors, and all the money and the names of the donors will be sent to the Babe Didrikson Zaharias Cancer Fund, Inc. in Galveston, Texas (per suggestion of former wrestler George Zaharias, her widower)."

"By then, of course," relayed Kenyon, "Mildred Ella (Babe) Didrikson Zaharias had died, at John Sealy Hospital in Galveston TX, age 45, on September 27, 1956."

Three years later, the "Babe Zaharias All-Sports Week" was formed in her honor. For five years, Babe's "week" showcased sporting events in Tampa and raised money, but fell short of projected contributions. Looking for someone new to spearhead the cause in 1964, the fundraiser

committee asked Gordon to take over as the leader.

Not only did Gordon feel comfortable working with Tampa citizens during charity events, he also felt at home with both the racing fans and the drivers. Wrestling was a little different because Gordon had become popular with the fans, but thought of himself as an outsider when it came to the wrestlers. That all changed in the summer of 1964 as several incidents made Gordon finally come to feel accepted by his peers in the world of professional wrestling.

Many of the wrestlers in the business, like Eddie Graham, Don Curtis, Danny Hodge, and Sam Steamboat, had become licensed pilots. The guys ribbed Gordon on a regular basis because they were flyers and he wasn't. Secretly, Gordon began to take flying lessons. He thought his plan to get back at the guys was so clever. His plan was simple. He would get his license without their knowledge, and then, while airborne with the guys, he would bet each of them that he could perform

the basic flying maneuvers. The winning money from his bets would cover the cost of his private flying lessons. The big day finally came on August 11, 1964, for Gordon to fly solo, so he and his instructor, Milt, touched down at Tampa International. Before Gordon took off for his solo flight, Milt told him they needed to go inside to log his hours. To Gordon's surprise, a local band began playing when he entered the terminal and Don Curtis hung a big bow around his neck, including a sign with a few printed slogans: "Sneaky Solie," "Gutsy Wonder," and "Hells Answer." Sam and Laura Steamboat were also there, along with Danny Hodge, Dotty Curtis, Eddie Graham, and WTVT's Andy Hardy with camera in hand. Even Smoky was there. Gordon hadn't fooled his friends and the joke was on him. It didn't bother him too much. Realizing that he was officially "one of the guys," he bought the whole group breakfast afterwards.

The feeling of approval kept coming, particularly on September 7, when Alcade Marcelo Maseda

pronounced Gordon Solie as the "Automobile Racing Commissioner of Ybor City."

Gordon, however, did not rest on his laurels. He decided the fans in Tampa deserved more, and another night of stock car racing, such as the figure 8 races, would fit the bill. Unlike the spring months, when it had been hard to find drivers, figure 8 racing began to catch on. In the Tampa Times, Paul Hemphill mentioned Dave Shreve, who drove in the figure-eights up north for two years before relocating to Tampa. He was making $75 a week working in a Tampa area service station, but picked up an extra $1,800 in four months by chauffeuring cars in the figure 8 races (14). To top it off, his expenses on six stock cars only totaled $200. Shreve had a great second job, and it was fun. Other drivers who were reluctant to drive jumped on the band wagon. Yes, they thought it was a little nutty to drive on a racetrack diagonally from corner to corner, on what used to be part of the infield. And yes, they thought it was a little weird to drive through an intersection with

other cars trying to race through at the same time.

Considering the small investment required to enter a car in the figure-8 races, Gordon thought it was a great way for new drivers to get started in racing, and he was correct in his assumptions. The figure 8 races were changed to Monday nights and quickly built up a crowd of 2,000 patrons per night. If it had been up to Gordon, there would have been racing events going on six nights a week, and that's only because he wouldn't want anything to conflict with fans coming to the wrestling matches at the Armory on Tuesdays nights. As it was, Sunshine Speedway and Dragstrip ran events on Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays and Mondays while Golden Gate Speedway held racing cards on Fridays and Saturdays, with special events on Sundays.

The Florida Late Model Stock Car Championships were set for November 8, 1964, and the length of the feature race changed from 100 to 200 laps. Drivers from the area like the

Reutimann brothers and Dave Scarborough filed entry forms. Local driver Bill Roynon had been reinstated and filed an entry. Earlier in the year, Roynon had been suspended indefinitely for smashing another driver, Daddy-O Morales, in the head with a helmet after a race. To this day, Morales still has a scar on his head to prove it.

The news of the race grabbed attention beyond Florida, and out-of-state drivers decided to join the competition. Joe Lee Johnson, winner of the 1960 Charlotte World "600," and Freddie Fryar, both of Chattanooga, Tennessee, signed up, along with Bobby Allison from Hueytown, Alabama. Allison was a familiar driver to racing fans after winning three straight NASCAR modified titles. Gordon handled the "wheel by wheel" live broadcasting and local radio stations added their own race analysis. WALT Radio in Tampa carried the race for the first time through announcers Dick Oppenheimer and Larry Vance. Jim Gallagher and Dick Crippen, announcers at Sunshine Speedway, covered the 200-lapper for WILZ Radio.

In the 200-lapper program, Gordon placed an ad for the wrestling in Tampa.

As Gordon's voice boomed through the PA system at Golden Gate Speedway, 6,000 fans watched Freddie Friar take the 1964 Florida State Late Model Championship in a close contest against a previous winner, Dave McInnis. After driving his victory lap, Fryar received a first place purse of $1250.

Five days later, Gordon was at another big event, a world championship wrestling match. Hiro Matsuda, a wrestler from Japan, had become extremely popular in Tampa. When Matsuda first came to the Suncoast, fans expected to see some kind of martial arts performance when he climbed into the ring. They were surprised to see that he also had advanced wrestling skills. CWF had a television campaign to promote Matsuda's upcoming match with Danny Hodge, a three-time NCAA wrestling champion who had been wearing the N.W.A. world junior heavyweight title since

July 22, 1960. Gordon, Luttrall, Matsuda, and Hodge appeared together on television for a contract signing for a junior heavyweight title match. The photo of the historical signing also appeared in newspapers in Japan.

Danny Hodge reminisced about the highly publicized match, saying, "Toward the end of the 60-minute match, one of the cameras ran out of film. At the same time, the only other camera was having its film changed, and during that time, Hiro delivered a karate chop to me that ended the match. Hiro was the new world junior heavyweight champion, but the end of the match was never got caught on film."

Even though Danny surrendered the title belt in Tampa, he still had a great time while staying there. He became friends with both Gordon and Cowboy. In fact, he used to go fishing at two o'clock in the morning with Cowboy. Sol Fleischman had a fishing business, and on one memorable occasion, he took his boat out with

Danny and Cowboy. While Cowboy was at the wheel of the boat, Danny was fishing near the stern and Sol was fishing from his perch on the motor. Danny got a nibble and began to gently pull on his fishing pole, only to lose the fish. He subsequently heard about it from Luttrall. People had previously mentioned to Danny that Cowboy could rattle off cuss words with the best of them, and that proved to be true. "That's no way to pull on the mother fu–ing pole. Put some fu–ing muscle into the damn thing, for crissakes," screamed Cowboy at Danny.

A little while later, Danny got another bite. Not wanting a repeat verbal blast from Cowboy, Danny pulled very hard on his fishing pole. In fact, he pulled so hard that he fell backwards and smashed into Sol, who went airborne off the motor and slammed into the interior wall of the boat. During the "mayhem" (as Gordon would have called it), Sol's fishing pole sailed out of the boat and into the waters of Tampa Bay.

As far as Gordon was concerned, Danny said,

"He was one of the greatest announcers I ever heard. He gave credit to the wrestlers and did not try to put the emphasis on himself. Gordon was always punctual, too."

In between his duties for racing and wrestling, Gordon still managed to find time for interaction with friends. On one occasion when the phone rang, Gordon's good buddy, Bob Vallee, was on the other end of the line. "Hey, Gordy! Do you want to own half of a fire engine?"

"What are you talking about?" asked Gordon.

"Well, I put in a bid of $1,000 on a 40-year-old fire engine and I got it. Do you want to go halves with me?" asked Bob.

"What the hell! Why not?" was Gordon's answer.

Bob was going to drive the fire truck from Jacksonville to Tampa, but yielded to Gordon's suggestion, and a truck with a flatbed trailer hauled their new toy to Tampa. Bob couldn't resist

driving the newly acquired machine around town and trying out all the bells and whistles. When he pulled up to a popular restaurant, everyone, including police and fireman, wanted to check out the new ride.

Bob and Gordon had a lunch date with the vice president of Hamilton Bank and decided to escort the man to the restaurant by fire truck. As they approached the bank, Bob began reaching for the siren control. "Bob, please don't," was all Gordon could say before the sirens went off and lights began flashing. Needless to say, the man at the bank definitely knew his ride had shown up.

Most people didn't know that Gordon invested money in the vehicle. He was more of a silent partner. Bob and Gordon were in the car one day with Bob's father when Bob's dad turned and spoke to Gordon. "Gee, Gordon. It was sure nice of Bob to put your name on his fire truck, wasn't it?"

Gordon responded, "Yes, that was really special.”

On New Year’s Eve, Bob went overboard as he drank heavily. He drove the fire truck, with lights flashing and siren blaring, through the streets of downtown Tampa. Cars followed him, and people wanted to either sit in the truck or take a ride. With police officers in hot pursuit, Bob finally pulled into the parking lot of a popular lounge. With local law enforcement ready to put Bob in jail and throw away the keys, a state trooper walked up and said, "I’ll take care of this." After everyone was cleared away from the fire truck, the officer, who also happened to be a friend, barked at Valley, "Bob, what the fu– are you’re doing? You’re drunk, you have an open bottle of booze in your hand, and you’re pissing off most of the cops in the city. Now, give me the keys, climb down out of there, and find another way home.”

Sometime later, when the novelty of the fire engine began to wear down, Gordon’s phone rang.

It was Bob Vallee. "Hey, Gordy. Do you want to go in with me on a 38-foot boat?”

"What’s the deal?" asked Gordon.

"Well … we can trade the fire engine in on the boat, and it won’t cost us that much.”

After hearing the price, Gordon asked, "Why so cheap?”

Bob replied, "Well, it has a leak. I have a crew standing by to pump out the water and repair the damage. I told the guy at the bank that he could recover a few bucks by selling it to us immediately. Otherwise, it will be at the bottom of Tampa Bay and he won’t get a dime." Bob again asked the standard question, "So, do you want to go halves with me on the deal?”

Once again, Gordon came back with, "What the hell! Why not?”

Besides wheeling and dealing, Bob had many

other talents. At times, he was asked to act as a go-between when two men had a dispute. The men sat facing each other at the ends of a table and each stated their side of the story. Bob was the armed mediator, and remained seated halfway down one side of the table until the issue had been resolved.

As Gordon began his 15th year in Tampa, his persona in the wrestling business was bigger than ever and his name was used to promote live wrestling events. "Gordon Solie Will Announce Mat Program" was the header for an article in the Palm Beach Post on January 18, 1965, and it was effective. Some of the people who would not otherwise attend the wrestling matches took notice of the fact that Gordon Solie was going to be there, and they showed up and bought tickets to the Polo Grounds in Palm Beach. Besides seeing Gordon in person, the fans got their money's worth with the quality of pro wrestlers on hand. Notables appearing on the card were Bob Orton, Sr., Tarzan Tyler, Sam Steamboat, Fred Blassie, Chief Little Eagle, Hiro Matsuda, Danny Miller, Corsica Joe,

and Corsica Jean.

Danny Miller recalled his first interview with the voice of Florida wrestling:

"I was in the back of the studio with Eddie Graham and some of the guys. All of a sudden, it was time for my interview. Early on, Gordon said something like, 'I understand you have an older brother, Dr. Bill Miller, who also wrestles professionally.'"

After Danny acknowledged that Bill was in fact his brother and a pro wrestler, Gordon continued to talk about Dr. Bill Miller. It seemed that Gordon was building up to something important, when he turned on his dead-pan face and spoke directly to Danny. "We've had a couple of phone calls from ladies in New York claiming that Dr. Bill Miller is the father of their children." Danny looked at Gordon, not having a clue as to what was going on. Gordon then began to laugh because the whole thing was a rib on Danny. There were no cameras

running because Gordon had set it up that way in advance so he could play a little joke on Danny.

On another occasion, Danny was at the Strawberry Festival for a wrestling event booked by Gordon. "It was surprisingly cold," said Danny. "My wife, Karen, was there, and so was Gordon's wife, Smoky. Neither of them brought jackets, and they were freezing with the rest of the crowd. Smoky remembered she had two minks in the car, so she went and got them. Smoky wore one and Karen wore the other, and the ladies sat there in mink stoles trying to stay warm at the outdoor wrestling matches."

As the interest in Tampa wrestling continued to grow, Gordon noticed that the second part of his original goal was beginning to take shape. His plan to generate more media coverage for professional wrestling was actually coming to fruition. Tom McEwen didn't miss much when it came to the sports world, and as the sports editor for the Tampa Tribune, he could pick and choose his

subjects. McEwen elected to write an article titled "The Summit." It was an appropriate title to describe a conference that took place on May 15, 1965 at the Thomas Jefferson Hotel. The hotel served as Luttrall's headquarters before he bought the Sportatorium building at 106 N. Albany Avenue, just off Kennedy Boulevard in Tampa. Fans in Tampa made weekly trips to the hotel cigar shop to buy advance tickets for wrestling and stock car events. Another point mentioned by McEwen was that 700,000 people had already paid money that year to attend weekly events promoted by the group of well-dressed men who were in attendance at the "Summit."

The biggest thrill for the group was that two percent of all admissions, after taxes, went to the Florida Sheriffs Boys Ranch. Seated around the conference table were the "who's who" in Florida wrestling: Cowboy Luttrall, promoter of Championship Wrestling from Florida and live shows in Tampa, Jacksonville, and Palm Beach; Milo Steinborn, promoter in Orlando; Gordon

Solie, the voice of wrestling; Pat O'Hara, promoter in St. Petersburg, Sarasota, Fort Myers and Lakeland; Ed Cameron, promoter in Fort Lauderdale and former captain for University of Miami football; Chris Dundee, promoter in Miami Beach; Eddie Graham, wrestler and administrator; and Mitch Gossett, Eddie's brother (McEwen D1). Mitch, known to the fans as "Skip" Gossett, refereed wrestling matches in Tampa in the 1950s and had worked in every facet of the wrestling promotion, including being the office manager for Cowboy.

Besides getting together to exchange ideas, the group had another purpose. They all wanted to appear on the CWF program. When the afternoon wrestling tapings concluded, Gordon headed toward Golden Gate Speedway to announce the Saturday night races.

As the 1965 season came to an end, plans were made for the annual Florida Late Model Stock Car Championships. For the first time ever in Florida,

the Governor’s Cup was awarded to a short track. The "Cup" was inscribed with the name "Al Keller" in memory of his contributions as a former USAC driver. A Tampa resident, Keller drove cars for over two decades beginning in the 1940s, including some stocks owned by Frank Dery. After finishing fifth in the 1961 Indy "500," behind the winner, A.J. Foyt, Keller was involved later that year in a fatal crash during a 100-lapper in Phoenix, Arizona. Four racing seasons had passed since his death, and drivers assembled at Golden Gate Speedway for an opportunity to add their name beside Keller’s on the coveted Governor’s Cup trophy. Also on hand for the Governor’s Cup race was John T. Bevis, Jr., a representative from the Florida Development Commission. Solie and Dery gave partial credit for the success of Golden Gate Speedway to Bevis, who helped promote the sport statewide by writing articles about auto racing in Florida. Bevis began working closely with Gordon and the two subsequently became casual friends.

Freddie Fryar returned to the "Gate" for a shot at the Governors Cup and brought along his running mate, Bobby Burcham, also from Chattanooga. Ray Traatham and Jack Ingram from Asheville, North Carolina, added to the growing list of out-of-state drivers participating in the annual race. According to Wayne Shufelt of the Tampa Times, Alabama's Bobby Allison was at a speaking engagement in Washington, D.C. and couldn't make the main time trials. He ended up starting last in a Sunday 25-lap qualifying race and passed the other 16 drivers to win the heat. That gave Allison a starting position of 26th for the 200-lap championship, which was held on November 14, 1965.

Two names constantly penetrated the track noise during the 200-lapper as Gordon relayed the exploits of 20-year-old Wayne Reutimann and a popular NASCAR driver, Bobby Allison. It took Allison 50 laps to work through 24 cars and catch Reutimann, who had taken the lead in lap number 23. In second position for 150 laps, Allison relentlessly hounded Reutimann. At one point,

Reutimann locked bumpers with Paul Connors and thought sure his car would spin out. Not knowing which way Reutimann's car would go, Allison had no opportunity to pass. A little later, Allison outfoxed Reutimann coming out of the second turn and snuck down inside. Allison let off a little too soon, but still managed to climb about halfway up the inside of Reutimann's car. The only opportunity for victory at that moment would have been to ram Reutimann and literally knock him out of the race, but Allison didn't want to win like that.

Having Bobby Allison on his tail for three-quarters of the race wasn't Reutimann's only concern. His new Teflon buttons for stopping an oil leak on his 327 Chevrolet didn't arrive on time to be installed before the race, so Wayne had to jury-rig oil cans to the dashboard. The 1957 Chevy had been using too much oil and Wayne knew that could create mechanical problems during the 200-lapper. He took a steel lacquer/thinner can and ran a hose out of the bottom of the can to gravity feed the oil into the engine. He installed a petcock so he

could open it at intervals and add some oil. Wayne described his periodic adjustments during the race, "I had to poke the can or thump it once in a while to get the gravity feed flowing again, but it worked."

As Wayne headed to the finish line, fans worried about the smoke coming out from under the hood of his car. Bobby Allison took advantage of a slowdown by Reutimann, and again, slipped inside of Wayne. It was the kind of finish that fans loved to watch: two drivers running side by side toward the finish line at full throttle. Wayne led by just a hair on the outside, which was enough as he won by about one hood length ahead of Allison. Wayne Reutimann, the youngest driver out of 36 in the starting field, became the first to have his name inscribed on the Governor's Cup. He also received a check for $1,653 for the winning purse and lap money.

Decades later, Wayne still remembers the big race: "Bobby Allison was on my bumper for a long

time, but I was able to maintain the lead. I thought he had me one time when we were passing a lapped car, but it worked out and I got the victory. Bobby ran a good clean race. I think it helped that I had a Moldex Tool Company crankshaft installed. That added a one-inch stroke and we had the 327 putting out around 401. My brother, Buzzie, tried one first on his car and got the kinks worked out of it. We've always had a close relationship as brothers, and I feel that Buzzie's willingness to share his experience definitely helped me win the title."

The sensation of stock car racing wasn't the only reason Gordon seemed to be in the limelight. Good or bad, the name "Gordon Solie" began to appear in Florida newspapers consistently. Wrestling promos listed competitors with names like "El Grande" Lothario, the Masked Medics, "Two Ton" Harris, "Cyclone" Soto, "Sputnik" Monroe, the Missouri Mauler, Diamond Lil', and the Infernos. More and more in newspaper ads, along with the wrestlers' names, the byline "Special Guest

Announcer, Gordon Solie" was included.

Occasionally, Gordon got a taste of wrestling's negative media coverage as well. On page four of the May 31, 1966 edition of the Florida Sun-Bulletin, a paper owned by Blythe C. Andrews, a reference was made about an earlier column that condemned Gordon "for talking too much on TV." It appeared to the paper that "Gordon was the center of the attraction, and not the wrestlers." On a Championship Wrestling from Florida broadcast, Gordon fired back: "Blythe Andrews, in his fine paper, has criticized me for philosophizing." The newspaper admitted that Gordon was fluent and well read, but they still thought the newspaper's comments had helped Gordon in his weekly broadcast as he began to put more emphasis on the wrestlers, and not as much on himself, during his broadcasts. The column also noted that shows at the Armory wouldn't have as many people in the seats without Gordon Solie at the microphone.

Besides what Gordon saw in the news, his

friends and acquaintances occasionally sent clippings to him. Ray Knopke, a member of the Florida House of Representatives, mailed Gordon an article dated September 6, 1966, from the same bi-weekly Florida Sun-Bulletin. In a column on page four, it seemed that some folks were wondering what happened to the Masked Medics, a heel tag team who wore white masks and white doctors' uniforms, complete with stethoscopes. Evidently, they lost a no-holds-barred, no-disqualification, loser-leave-town match to Tarzan Tyler and Sputnik Monroe, so they left town. In late August, the Masked Medics showed up in Little Rock, Arkansas, and put up a $1,000 bond for any tag team that could defeat them. After disabling one opponent, they ganged up on the other, cruised to a victory, and kept their money.

The Robinson Arena in Little Rock charged anywhere from 50-cents admission for children to $1.50 for reserved seats, in comparison to the Armory in Tampa, where fans paid between a dollar for kids to $3.00 for ringside seats. The

Florida Sun-Bulletin explained their thoughts on the price difference: "The reason Tampa can collect much more than Little Rock is Cowboy Luttrall as a promoter and Gordon Solie as an announcer. Nobody around here can equal Solie as an announcer. When Cowboy looks at what he's got in Solie in building up crowds for his promotions, he might well consider giving him a raise and a bonus."

Knopke mentioned that perhaps he should have mailed the clipping to Luttrall, instead of sending it to Gordon. A final note from Knopke to Gordon read, "How about signing you up as my PR man now?"

Dotty Curtis, wife of wrestler Don Curtis, agreed with the fact that no one could equal Gordon as a professional wrestling broadcaster. "Gordon was brilliant, perhaps a genius," said Dotty. "He was the master of the English language, and that came across during his broadcasts. It was rare for him to make an error during his play-by-play, but if he

did, I'd tease him about it. During one of the matches, a wrestler was trying to pin Jerry London. Jerry raised his shoulder and then arched his back in order to avoid being pinned. Gordon described the maneuver: 'There is London bridging … ah … ah … ah … this bridge is not going to crumble.'" Dotty had a lot of fun with that one for quite a while at Gordon's expense.

Dotty said another key figure emerged from Championship Wrestling from Florida: Eddie Graham. "Eddie was very smart," stated Dotty, "and it was his idea to send my husband, Don, up to Jacksonville to take over as the promoter. Jimmy Murdock, the promoter at the time, was getting up in years, and Don was ready to quit wrestling in the ring, so it was a good decision on Eddie's part."

Gordon always said Eddie was highly intelligent, and there was no argument about that statement from wrestlers like Dick Steinborn. "Eddie started a segment on the televised wrestling

show," stated Dick, "called ‘The Hold of the Week.’ Gordon narrated in the ring as Eddie and I executed a wrestling hold. The following week, we might show a reversal or an escape from the hold we’d performed the week before. In fact, I remember driving into a small Florida town and seeing two kids wrestling in a front yard. They were practicing ‘The Hold of the Week’ from the previous program. On top of that, Eddie ran that part of the show at the twenty-seven-minute mark, and it kept viewers in their seats until the commercial break. It was a big success.”

Steinborn added that Eddie processed information fast and came back at people quickly. One time, Dick and Eddie each died their hair blonde and went to wrestle in Georgia as a tag team. Freddie Blassie had been wrestling there as a "heel," but had left the territory for another commitment. Dick and Eddie showed up with their bleached-blonde hair and made their entrance into an arena in Hogansville, Georgia. The circular-shaped interior of the building was normally used

to sell cattle, so they walked through sawdust on their way to the ring. There was some crowd booing, but one guy, in particular, was obnoxiously yelling "hee-haw, hee-haw" repeatedly from a seat in the grandstands. As Dick and Eddie entered the ring, Eddie went over, took the microphone away from the ring announcer, and addressed the crowd: "I'm just like you folks. I'm a country boy from Chattanooga, Tennessee. When I was a young boy, I helped my granddad gather hay from the fields. We had a big, old mule that would pull the hay wagon back to the barn after we had a full load. One day after we finished and unhitched the mule, he took off and we never saw him again. I'm going to call my granddad in a minute and tell him that I found that loud-mouth jackass." Eddie pointed to the heckling fan and said, "He's right up there."

When the bleached blondes went to Indianapolis, they stayed in a hotel where several businesses occupied some of the floors. An insurance company could be found on one floor, and a stock investment group was on the fifth. When Eddie and

Dick's elevator stopped on the second floor, three men in suits got on and pushed the button for the fifth floor. That was all Eddie needed to know to begin having fun. "My wife divorced me and took me for fifty grand," claimed Eddie. Playing the straight-man, Dick came back with, "No kidding?"

"Yeah. She invested the fifty grand in the stock market."

"What did she buy?"

"She invested in Scott Toilet Paper," answered Eddie.

Again, Dick questioned Eddie, "How did that work out for her?"

"In six months, she was wiped clean," responded Eddie. The three businessmen laughed as they left the elevator and the tag team partners went up to their rooms.

Steinborn said that every time he returned to

Florida, Gordon had improved as a television broadcaster. "I was doing an interview with Gordon, and it was mentioned that Mike DiBiase was coming to Tampa to wrestle. Why it came out, I don't know, but I blurted out, 'When he comes to Florida, I'll be waiting on the apron.'" Those words began a feud, and when "Iron Mike" showed up for the match, Steinborn was already in the ring. The fans were anticipating the match and eagerly awaited Steinborn to step out of the ring and stand on the apron. As DiBiase made his way to the ring, Steinborn noticed the fans were still moving around and not paying much attention, so he moved from inside the ring and stood on the apron, as he had claimed on the broadcast. The crowd immediately sat down. As DiBiase began to go up the stairs to the ring, Steinborn attacked him.

Back at the Gate, Gordon's attention turned to the 200-lap Florida State Late Model Championships, i.e. the "Governor's Cup" race. Sixty cars showed up on November 5 for the first round of qualifying races, and 20 of them made it through (Toner 1C).

The next morning, the remaining 40 cars participated in heats to quality for the 16 available positions, and things got a little crazy. Before the tenth of 25 laps were completed, ten cars were eliminated from the race. Central Florida drivers like 17-year veteran, Dumont Smith of Satellite Beach, and Ray Snodgrass of Melbourne, represented six of the fastest times in qualifying.

One of Golden Gate Speedway's most popular drivers, Buzzie Reutimann, felt the influx of Central Florida drivers came about because of Gordon's efforts. Gordon had established a good working relationship with racetracks in other Florida cities like Melbourne and Orlando. He made arrangements to send drivers, including Buzzie, to compete at other Central Florida racetracks, and invited drivers from the other tracks to compete at the "Gate." The end result was more top flight drivers coming from other Florida racetracks to compete in the championships at Golden Gate Speedway.

The 36 drivers who earned a spot took to the track on November 6, 1966 for the Florida State Late Model Championships and picked up where qualifying races left off: caution flags and stoppages were common for the first 100 laps. After that, with not nearly as many cars on the track, the race ran smoothly. The 1966 Governor's Cup and the $1500 purse (not counting lap money) went to Bobby Brack from Miami. His fellow, Miamian, Billy Meyers, came in second ahead of Largo's Benny Moore.

Activities at Golden Gate Speedway that year also included a two-hour, 28-act performance by Dan Fleenor's Hurricane Hell Drivers.

Gordon's other employer at the time, Deep South Sports, was in the process of changing organizations. Previously, Deep South Sports had been aligned with the Southern Wrestling Alliance, and developed its own titles. A fast growing organization, the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA), took notice of Florida's successful

wrestling business, and Les Welch became the first Florida heavyweight champion recognized by the NWA.

One week before Christmas, Gordon decided to have some fun with the guys and try his luck at hunting. Johnny Hicks had 11,000 acres of land in Florida and asked Gordon to come along on a turkey hunt. In comparison to Johnny Hicks, who hunted an average of four to five times a week, Gordon was a rookie. Skip Gossett said he went with Johnny to a hunting stand, while Gordon and another hunter went to a stand in the other direction. Gordon said it seemed like he was out there forever, and he saw every other species in the world before he finally spotted a group of turkeys. Two shots and, fortunately, Gordon had two turkeys.

Bagging turkeys simply increased the list of accomplishments for Gordon. He had proven himself in radio, outdoor announcing, amateur stock car racing, publicity, fund-raising, and

television broadcasting. By then, Gordon also was a member of the Greater Tampa Showmen's Association, the Greater Tampa Chamber of Commerce Sports Committee, a board member on the Hillsborough County Cancer Society, and a member of the Young Democrats. As a person who could easily handle multiple tasks, Gordon decided to become a candidate for the Democratic nomination to the Florida State House of Representatives.

It seemed like a great idea until February 1967, when TV stations claimed they might discontinue carrying Championship Wrestling from Florida because of the FCC's "equal" time policy. By law, the stations had to provide "equal time" to the other eight candidates, or face possible loss of their licenses. Gordon didn't think the rule should apply to him because his avocation was television broadcasting. Everett Q. Jones, who represented Gordon, cited a similar case (Brigham vs. F.C.C 276 F.2d 828). He argued that the other candidates shouldn't get air time equal to the hours that

Gordon spent on television doing his job. The FCC stood firm, and because of the network conflicts, Gordon officially withdrew from the election. His name remained on the official voting ballots because there wasn't enough time to have it removed before the election took place. In the "City Hall" section of the Tampa Tribune, Gordon declared that the ruling by the FCC was discriminatory. He lost the first round with the FCC, but had no plans to give up. In order to benefit people who might encounter the same problem with the FCC, Gordon planned to address the unfair ruling again at a future date.

The election wasn't the only thing at the time that didn't work out as planned. Golden Gate Speedway was back in action for the 1967 season, but ran into problems early on. During one series of races, drivers arrived to compete in a 25-lap modified race, only to learn the race had been changed to a 50-lap contest. That wasn't a problem, except for the fact that Frank Dery expected the drivers to run the longer race for the

same purse. When Gordon announced the 50-lap race, none of the cars rolled out onto the track. Forty-five minutes went by with drivers refusing to compete. Finally, the drivers selected Will Cagle, Jimmy Riddle, Chet Rutledge, and Dave Scarborough to represent them in a confrontation with Frank Dery. Dery refused to talk to them, so the representatives spoke with Pancho Alvarez in the pit shack.

In response to the plea from the drivers, Pancho agreed to raise the purse by $90 and increase the split for the top finishers. It wasn't much of a raise, but it was enough to get the guys on the track and run the race. Will Cagle finished in third place and was paid an extra $15. He didn't think any more about it until the next night when he arrived at the back gate to check in. Cagle was told that he and his fellow drivers who had approached Pancho were banned from competition at Golden Gate Speedway. Cagle immediately stormed into Dery's office and asked, "I'm banned?"

Dery replied, "Yes, you are, for your involvement last night."

Cagle immediately fired back, "You're going to be sorry about this."

Cagle was angry with Dery, but he had no problem with Gordon. In fact, he said, "Gordon was always kind to me. Every since Golden Gate opened, Gordon offered my wife and I complimentary tickets to the wrestling matches at the Armory. While we were at the matches, Gordon acknowledged us in front of the fans. It made us feel good, and it was a good plug for the track." Dery was a different story.

The Florida Racing Association was subsequently formed, and demanded larger purses for the races. Will Cagle spearheaded the drivers' cause, which included even more demands on track owner, Frank Dery. The drivers wanted the association to control the money for the point standings, and they wanted Cagle reinstated. The

drivers seemed to be prepared to back up their demands by undermining the upcoming races at the "Gate." In the hope that drivers wouldn't show up, an unknown person called drivers in the Sarasota area, telling them that Golden Gate had canceled its races. Flyers were distributed to fans as they made their way into the track. In his Tampa Tribune column, Bob Smith communicated the fact that 100 drivers and owners were watching the Friday night races from the woods adjacent to the track. Needless to say, the fans were upset about the lack of cars on the track that night. Smith reported that only 19 cars showed up to compete, as compared to the normal 80 vehicles which normally checked into the pits.

On Saturday, March 4, 1967, things got ugly as almost 300 men picketed outside Golden Gate Speedway. When some of the drivers arrived and saw men and cars blocking their way, they left for fear of physical injury. In a second article about the dispute, Bob Smith said Dave McInnis had been told the day before that both his arms would

be broken if he crossed the picket lines. Another driver was told that if he crossed over, he wouldn't physically be able to work the following week. At starting time for the races that night, Gordon made the announcement that all Saturday night races were canceled. Disgruntled fans took their refunds and went home.

The drivers planned to meet on Monday to discuss Dery's offer, and hoped to meet with him on Tuesday. Dery said he didn't know if he wanted to meet with them just to rehash the same old topics. He had offered a little more money, but wouldn't budge on point money control or Cagle's suspension. Archie Blount of the Tampa Times explained that more than 100 drivers voted to reject Dery's offer at the Monday night meeting. It was said the drivers didn't want to put Dery out of business, but they would if they had to. They had plenty other options, like driving at Sunshine Speedway or Plant Field.

Gordon thought the offer was fair. He told Bob

Smith that the purses for 1966 had averaged more than $2,600 per week, and the track was offering an additional $160. Golden Gate planned to pay out around $100,000 in purses for the 1967 season. It was Gordon's opinion that the drivers who were protesting represented a minority of the Florida drivers. In an interview with Archie Blount, Gordon pointed out that the track was not the main source of income for either himself or Dery, and if the track had to close … well, it would just have to close. The dispute was officially at a standstill going into the month of March.

In April, Cagle normally went to race in the Northeast, so he and Buzzie Reutimann left for the spring races. A few of the remaining drivers got tired of not racing at the "Gate" and asked Wayne Reutimann, the Racing Association vice president, to call Dery and cut a deal. Wayne met with Dery and convinced him to make a small concession on the purses. It wasn't a huge increase, but it was enough to get the drivers back on the track. Golden Gate Speedway was soon packing the divisions

again for regular season races.

Gordon released the news that the southeast was again anticipating the arrival of Art Malone. He was headed back to Sunshine Dragstrip in St. Petersburg, where he had set the strip record the year before when his car reached 216.5 miles per hour. Locals were looking forward to their first glimpse of Malone's 1967 Mustang Fuel "Funny Car" with its 1000 horsepower.

Publicizing the races and announcing them were enjoyable for Gordon, but he still liked to get behind the wheel of a stock car whenever possible. Thinking he was the best amateur racecar driver in the state of Florida and could easily win over the other members of the Press-Radio-TV Club, Gordon set a match race for July 4, 1967 at Golden Gate Speedway. The opposition had other ideas, and apparently had a deal with the starter because Gordon raced out of his scratch position, only to be disqualified. When the race began, Gordon had no idea that the whole thing had been set up in

advance by his friends in the media. Archie Blount of the Tampa Times was supposed to start in the rear, but for some reason, was able to start in fourth position. Blount won the race and was followed by Herb Allen of the Tampa Tribune. The joke was at Gordon's expense, but it was all in fun and raised money for charity ("Solie Loses Match").

Gordon also announced that willing Press-Radio-TV Club members would face the Pepsi-Teem girls in a softball game at the "Gate" after the amateur speed contest. The girls' team lost only one game in the previous four regular seasons, and was favored by astronomical odds to squash the men's' team. Chico Genovese wrote about Gordon's athletic prowess in the Tampa Times, and mentioned that Gordon once hit a softball out of sight at Al Lopez Field in Tampa. Actually, Gordon hit the ball over the backstop and no one ever found it. It was apparent that Gordon wasn't destined to be a professional stock car driver, or any other kind of professional athlete for that

matter. He did find gratification, however, in the fact that he not only worked with people who succeeded as athletes, but also managed to establish friendships with some of them.

Don Curtis, for example, had proved himself as both an amateur and a professional wrestler before taking on the duties of wrestling promoter in Jacksonville, Florida. Gordon liked spending time with Don because he was a nice, laid-back guy who was fun to be around. Of course, even Don had his limits. He could get quite testy when somebody pushed him too far.

One time, Don agreed to help a rodeo publicity man by allowing the man to plug his event at his next wrestling card in the Jacksonville Coliseum. Intentionally or not, the guy insulted every wrestler and wrestling fan in the building when he said, "This is not like professional wrestling. It's real." Don ran through the stadium, leaped into the ring, lambasted the rodeo man, and knocked him across the ring. Later, Don laughed when he said the mat

was wet. The guy just slipped, fell down, and hit his head. Don added that all the cops at the Coliseum saw it the same way as he did.

Both Don and Gordon shared another common interest: giving back to their respective communities. Gordon set up yet another charity event, and the wrestlers in Tampa took time to play a baseball game at Golden Gate Speedway, with admission proceeds earmarked to go to the Pony League Division of Hillsborough County. All-Stars from seven Pony League teams played against pro grapplers, which included Les Welch, Eddie Graham, Sam Steamboat, Bronco Kelly, and Jose Lothario. And, of course, there were stock car events at the "Gate" for three days in a row.

It became apparent to Gordon and other racing enthusiasts that the sport's future would depend on television syndication. Gordon knew the local racing revenue could no longer compete with the revenue from the televised wrestling matches. Back in 1961, the business of racing and wrestling

in Tampa seemed to have some parallels financially, but as time when on, the televised wrestling matches generated much larger revenues than the live shows in either sport. During its early years, Golden Gate Speedway was fortunate to have enjoyed good crowds and favorable weather, so their live events were successful. During the second half of the 1960s, however, that all began to change. The track was hampered with numerous rainouts, and environmental agencies began making complaints about noise and air pollution. Changing circumstances set the stage for Gordon to become less involved in racing, and for him to assume a larger role with the men and women of the "squared circle."

The preparations for the November 3, 1967 200-lap Florida State Late Model Championships included temporarily moving a flatbed trailer onto the track infield. A decorative covering was placed on the bed, converting it into a platform for awards, announcements, etc. Small palm trees were placed in the perimeter around the trailer to

dress up the setting for the festivities. Since everything was set up in advance, the platform was available for a special race on Friday night before the Saturday time trials and the Sunday championships. Gordon stood on the platform, microphone in hand, and moved in a circular manner while describing the race at hand. For whatever reason, Larry Brazil lost control of his car, ran off the track, and plowed over some of the palm trees. As he was pulling away, Brazil jokingly screamed, "I'll get you next time around, Solie."

In the November 4, 1967 edition of the Television Sports Menu, one of the featured sections in the Tampa Times, Championship Wrestling from Florida, was listed three times: Saturday night at 7:30 on Channel 38, Sunday at two o'clock in the afternoon on Channel 10, and Sunday at five o'clock on Channel 38. The two o'clock time slot placed wrestling in the same time period as the Miami Dolphins/Buffalo Bills game aired on Channel 8, and the Green Bay

Packers/Baltimore Colts game on Channel 13. At five o'clock, wrestling aired opposite the Channel 13 presentation of the New York Giants/Minnesota Vikings game. Even against such strong competition as professional football, Championship Wrestling from Florida drew good ratings. It had become a strong area presence among televised sporting events, and it still was considered a sporting event under the jurisdiction of the state athletic commission at the time.

Gordon continued to broadcast televised wrestling with the same seriousness and professionalism, but occasionally, he would slip in his own style of humor. He heard about an incident where Don Curtis had driven a friend on some errands, one of which included a stop at a bank. Scott Teal wrote about the mishap in issue number nine of his wrestling newsletter, Whatever Happened To…? While waiting in line for a bank teller, Don wrote a note and handed it to his friend, Jack. The note read, "Give me all your money. I've got a bomb." Jack chuckled and gave it back to

Don, who crumpled it up and tossed it towards a trash can. The paper bounced off the rim of the can and landed on the floor. A curious clerk picked up the note, read it, and handed it to a security guard who, in turn, notified the police. What Don didn't realize was that shortly after that, a man walked into a Delta Airlines ticket agency and actually handed the teller a note about having a bomb. The police had two bomb notes and one suspect — Don Curtis. The police arrested Don at his home and took him to jail. After quite an ordeal with local law enforcement officials, Don was cleared of all charges and released.

Gordon thought the story was hilarious, and as much ribbing as he had taken from his friends, he thought it was time for a little payback. The next time Don got into the ring, Gordon was ready. As an amateur wrestler, Don had wrestled at Buffalo University, so Gordon introduced him as Don "The Buffalo Bomber" Curtis. Gordon wasn't finished. Don used to make phone calls to Gordon and pretend to be a woman, so Gordon began to call

him "Elaine." When Don came back to the table for an interview after wrestling, Gordon said, "And here he is … Don E. Curtis, the Buffalo Bomber!" Don's middle initial was not E, but from that day on, wrestling fans have called him "Don E. Curtis, the Buffalo Bomber" … with no idea that it all began as a joke (Teal 4, 5).

Don and his wife, Dotty, were good friends with Gordon and Smoky, and the four of them got together whenever possible. With each of their schedules being so diverse, Don and Dotty would often meet Gordon and Smoky at the racetrack. Smoky could be found in the press box helping Polly Roat as an assistant scorer, while Gordon announced the races.

Chapter 5: Solie's Hog

(l to r) Jack Brisco, John Bevis and Don Curtis were on hand to present the "Governor's Award" to Gordon on *Championship Wrestling from Florida*

On the second weekend of November 1967, Gordon found time to try his luck again as a hunter, and his friend in the media had to tell the tale in the

Tampa Times' column, "Outdoors with Archie Blount."

Gordon Solie doesn't let minor problems stand in the way of his hog hunting — little problems like running out of ammunition.

Take last weekend for instance. The local television announcer was perched in a pine tree on Johnny Hick's hunting spread near Lakeland awaiting a deer, or perhaps some turkey. Beside him in his stand was a trusty 308 rifle and a shotgun. The rifle contained three shots and the shotgun had three No. 4 shells.

With this arsenal ready, Solie spied a hog and pumped three rounds in the 300-pound boar's shoulder. The black hog thundered off into the palmettos bellowing and snorting. Solie waited until he thought the hog was dead and then climbed down from his perch.

Clutching the shotgun, he cautiously

approached the downed pig. But it wasn't dead and Solie emptied the shotgun into the animal. Still the boar tried to charge. Solie was quicker, however, and retreated to the jeep and drove back to camp where he availed himself of a handful of buckshot shells and returned to the scene. Two rounds of "double aught" at close range was enough to convince Solie he'd finally done the job. It was his first hog. Hicks found Solie grunting and straining trying to drag the big boar out of the palmettos as the sun set. Hicks surveyed Solie's prize and said, "Tell you one thing, Gordon." "What's that, John?" "He's dead." (16A)

Besides nailing a boar, Gordon preserved some wrestling history that year when he spearheaded the publication of Championship Wrestling Annual, 1967 Edition, an innovative magazine that was ahead of its time in the world of pro wrestling. As the agent for RoGo Corporation, Gordon arranged to have the magazine printed on slick, heavyweight

paper, with photos from the files of Ross Parsons. The front cover featured a color photo of Eddie Graham and Sam Steamboat wearing the Florida version of the world tag team title belts. On the inside front cover, there was six photos of former world champ, Lou Thesz, grappling with Gene Kiniski. It was Kiniski who took the world belt from Thesz in January 1966. There were 32 pages of photos and captions describing pros such as Sputnik Monroe, Karl von Brauner, Danny Miller, Freddie Blassie, Ernie Ladd, Jose Lothario, Hiro Matsuda, the Great Malenko, Chief Wahoo McDaniel, the Missouri Mauler, Klondike Bill, Sailor Art Thomas, Terry Funk, Les Welch, the Kentuckians, Tarzan Tyler, Big Bob Orton, Yukon Eric, the Infernos with manager J.C. Dykes, Dick Steinborn, Kurt and Karl von Stroheim, Cowboy Bob Ellis, Chief Little Eagle, Buddy Fuller, Swede Hanson, and Rip Hawk.

It also was around this time that Gordon introduced his trademark closing statement for the Championship Wrestling from Florida TV

program. Fans knew the program was over when Gordon winked, half-saluted the lead camera, and said, "This is Gordon Solie, saying … so long from the Sunshine State." The saying became famous and was used by Gordon for the next 20 years.

In April 1968, Gordon wrote an article for the Tampa Times. He thought people who didn't race or own a race car might want to know what it takes to run a racetrack, so he wrote a story that described a race, step by step, from the time an owner or driver first entered the back gate of the speedway, through the pit check-ins, and up until the cars crossed the finish line. A few weeks later, Gordon was seen on Tampa's Channel 3, WEDU-TV, the only non-profit educational station on television in a nine-county area. "Auctioneer" Solie rode a big, three-wheel bicycle on the charity set and subsequently sold the "trike" and other merchandise to help raise money for the cause.

In an article for the Tampa Tribune called "The Devoted," Tom McEwen displayed Gordon's growing popularity with reprints of fan mail that had been sent to Gordon. "Maybe there are no more devoted and determined fans than those of wrestling, and if there ever is to be a headquarters for that group, Tampa will be a strong candidate," (1F) wrote McEwen. Tom went on to say that high ratings for the TV wrestling show, and the stacks of fan mail for Gordon, were proof of a loyal following for Tampa wrestling. The show was viewed in three stations in North Carolina, every major market in Florida, and also made its way into homes in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

One fan wrote asking if Gordon wore lipstick. Another complained about the dirty ring tactics of Blimp Harris, and didn't think the wrestler should be allowed anywhere near the city of Tampa. A comment from yet another fan said:

> After viewing the filmed telecast depicting the sadistic conduct of johnny valentine (lower case intended), one can only be left with a feeling of utter disgust with such an individual. It means to me that the powers of the National Wrestling Alliance were amiss in not suspending the license of this brute, or should I say, wild animal, for at least the period Red Bastien was out of action due to the injuries, including a hefty fine of a few thousand dollars. (1F)

"B.R." from Bradenton asked, "Dear Mr. Solie. Have you ever wrestled professionally yourself, and if so, can we see a picture of you in your trunks?" The editor's note was "No to both, in fact, emphatically no to both."

In the late '60s, people gathered at the homes of friends and relatives, and they all sat down to watch the wrestlers on TV. One of the fans from Inverness, Florida, wrote to thank Solie and Luttrall on behalf of his whole neighborhood. They

lived too far away (considered a short drive today of about 75 miles) to go to the live matches, so they had a neighborhood get-together whenever Championship Wrestling Florida aired.

Both fans and wrestlers enjoy talking about their memories of Gordon Solie. Fresh out of the military and prior to becoming a professional wrestler, Jack Welch went to Florida with his dad, Les. He got to watch Gordon in action and recalled what he saw: "Gordon had a great presence on camera. He looked sophisticated, had a great voice, and coined a lot of phrases. After he spoke about an upcoming match, Gordon would say 'Be there!' I hadn't heard that expression on TV before, but I certainly heard it a lot after Gordon started to use the phrase. He literally paved the way for other announcers in our business."

His brother, Roy Lee, also knew Gordon, and said, "Gordon was so enthusiastic. He loved to talk to the guys and we knew that he always had our backs covered. If we rambled during an

interview, he brought us back on track. Gordon had this great voice and was extremely knowledgeable about the business. Whether it was in an interview or during his play-by-play, Gordon used some words that were so big that people had to look them up in a dictionary to see what they meant. And Gordon liked to play jokes on us at times. In one of my early bouts in Florida, I wrestled in a six-man tag team match. One of the guys was a black wrestler, and I didn't think much about it until Gordon interviewed me after the match. The interview was going fine until Gordon looked at me and said, 'Knowing just how prejudiced you are, how did you feel about wrestling this man?' I'm sure that I had a surprised look on my face, and then Gordon started to laugh. The rib was on me."

The media seemed to be more and more aware of Gordon's activities, and did not limit stories about him to just racing and wrestling. Frank Klein wrote a story in his column that went like this:

> The "Warmup" round for the money match between two of Tampa's worst golfers, Gordon Solie and Sam Mase, has been held at Loch Raven and Solie says he edged Mase by five strokes while using a nine iron that had a broken shaft. If Sam hadn't chased after a lost ball and fallen waist deep in mud, the story might have been different. The "big" match, I'm told, will be on a par-three course at Largo, and I'm glad the schedule doesn't call for any trips near that layout any time soon. (B1)

The fact that Gordon could not physically perform at a high level in sports may have been why he respected and praised good athletes when describing their feats. He admired gifted athletes in every sport, regardless of whether it was a highly skilled race driver, a talented wrestler, or a game-winning running back in football. That admiration came across to his listeners when Gordon was at the microphone, and not only made him convincing, but lent credibility to whatever event he was

describing.

Gordon also received accolades from his peers for his initiative behind the scenes. When Eddie Graham decided to bring wrestlers Jim Starr and Billy Garrett into the territory as a masked team, he spoke about the idea with referee Ken Ramey. Ramey got his start in wrestling in the Atlanta, Georgia territory, then moved to Amarillo and went to work for Dory Funk, Sr. While there, Graham called and asked him what he thought about Starr. "I told Eddie that Starr was a good hand," said Ramey. "I said, 'Weren't the Medics down there real hot at one time?' Garrett had been in Florida before with Dick Dunn as the Masked Medics. After a couple of weeks, Starr and Garrett came to me and asked me to be their manager. We did a deal on TV where I became a turncoat, and in a few weeks time, we had so much heat that I had trouble getting in and out of the ring.

"Prior to me actually changing from referee to manager, however, I sat down and discussed the

idea with Gordon. During our conversation, I mentioned that I had made notes about the various wrestlers' strong points and weaknesses. Gordon used that idea to set the stage for my introduction as a 'manager' on Championship Wrestling from Florida. He announced that he had held 'Dr. Ken Ramey' in high esteem when I was a referee, and he couldn't believe that I would stoop to such a low level as to divulge secrets of professional wrestlers. Gordon went on to say that he was in total disbelief that I had turned out to be such a low-life character. The fans believed every word of Gordon's negative characterization and started yelling 'turncoat' or 'traitor' every time they saw me."

During the matches, Ken did his best to live up to Gordon's description of him as a "bad guy," or in wrestling terms, the "heel." While his team performed on the mat, Ken would pull a small piece of paper out of his pocket, crumble it up, and throw it into the ring. He would then complain to the referee about the debris in the ring. When the

referee turned to listen to Ken, the Medics would use illegal tactics on their opponents. Three or four times during a match, Ken would throw paper into the ring, and each time, he would complain to the referee. The fans would scream and yell insults about the dirty tactics employed by Ramey and his masked charges. Finally, Ken would tell the referee to make an announcement, asking the fans to quit throwing paper into the ring. That was the last straw, and the already-infuriated crowds would escalate their fervor to near-riot conditions. "We had so much heat in Miami Beach," said Ken, "that we had to park on the lower end of the beach and have the police drive us to the auditorium and back after the matches."

Ken gives Gordon a lot of credit for doing such a good job of selling the Medics as the "bad guys."

When Ken went to San Francisco with a masked team called the Interns [Jim Starr and Tom Andrews], the police came to the dressing room in the Cow Palace and showed them bullets that had

been removed from the guns of wrestling fans … fans who planned to shoot them. In Las Vegas, the local police told Ramey he would be arrested for "inciting a riot" if he threw "one more piece of paper into the ring."

Ken Ramey never forgot his beginning days as a manager with CWF, and he never forgot Gordon's assistance. However, one of Ken's fondest memories of Gordon took place outside of the "squared circle." Once in awhile, there was a card game in the afternoon at the Sportatorium in Tampa. Eddie Graham was against the idea of the occasional poker game, but he didn't really push the issue, especially since Cowboy Luttrall was one of the players. Ken remembered one card game in particular because one of the players drew a rarely seen royal flush. That player was Gordon Solie, and he took everybody to the cleaners that day with his winning hand.

At the end of August 1968, an announcement was made by Art Reuben, president of Tampa's WYOU

Radio. Gordon was appointed to the position of Sports Director for WYOU Radio, and listeners could hear Gordon Solie on six news and sportscasts daily from Monday through Friday. Of course, Gordon continued to fulfill his obligations to racing and wrestling.

In November 1968, the annual Florida State Late Model Stock Car Championships were held. Wayne Reutimann and Will Cagle kicked off the weekend on November 2nd with strong performances in the qualifying races. Golden Gate inverted the starting lineup, however, so a young man named Gary Balough from Hialeah, Florida, took the pole position on November 3rd, even though he finished ninth in qualifying time trials. Unlike Gordon's early days in Tampa when the racing results were not published, the news from the 200-lapper appeared on page one of Section C, the Sports section of the Tampa Tribune. Bill Kirby's column on November 3, 1968, included the fact that 7,500 patrons, a record crowd, watched as Dumont Smith and Randy Spivey from

Winter Haven, Florida, rammed each other right out of the race. Jim Alvis and Wayne Reutimann, two of the top contenders, left the race with mechanical problems. Will Cagle threatened the leader, Balough, late in the race, but his last charge resulted in his engine sputtering across the finish line due to low fuel.

John Bevis, representing the Florida Development Commission, was on hand to present the Governor's Cup to Balough, who led the race for the entire 200 laps. Balough walked away with $1,920, a television, and other prizes. Cagle took the second place winnings and Billy Gill placed third. Kirby's coverage continued on page five and mentioned that the 20-year-old Balough announced plans to join the southern NASCAR circuit and race in the modified-sportsman division.

The 200-lapper, the grand finale of the 1968 racing season, was a great success, but Gordon couldn't help notice that racing at Golden Gate Speedway had just about reached its peak. He

couldn't say the same about professional wrestling. In the mail at the Sportatorium, Gordon received a souvenir wrestling program from Big Time Wrestling in Dallas, an organization which regularly traded talent with the Florida office. More and more wrestling promotions like the one in Dallas were gathering momentum in the United States, and were trying to increase their fan base for live events through the use of television. There was a nationwide campaign going on in America to take violence out of television, and a lot of the finger pointing was directed toward professional wrestling. All the finger pointing and accusations did relatively nothing to hamper the momentum that was under way in the world of grappling.

By that time, Tampa was one of the focal points for the National Wrestling Alliance, primarily because of the success of Championship Wrestling from Florida. Eddie Graham and Gordon both said the production part of CWF had a lot to do with the program's popularity. Jerry Prater was the director of the highly rated TV show and said, "After using

the standard mobile unit for the shows in 1961, we got the color mobile unit (the first of several actually) with self-contained video recording equipment. By this time, we were shipping the show to a lot of different markets, so we kept on micro-waving the show back to the studio and made original ‘copies.’”

"Another big innovation," revealed Jerry, "was when I talked the front office into purchasing 16 mm film equipment. The selling point was that the interviews could be done in the privacy of the Sportatorium. The wrestlers were just too friendly with the other wrestlers with whom they were not supposed to be friendly when the guys all gathered up at Channel 13’s studios for interviews, and that irritated management. It turned out to be a good investment. I filmed Dory Funk, Jr. beating Gene Kiniski for the world title in Tampa [February 11, 1969], and that may have been the first major title match to be thusly preserved for posterity. I had to shoot the match in black and white for the extra film speed, and even then, it was marginal due to

poor lighting at the Armory. We used the film on our next videotaped, weekly wrestling show."

Fort Homer Hesterly Armory was jammed full of wrestling fans for the NWA world heavyweight championship match. After the introductions, the referee went over the pre-bout instructions with Funk and Kiniski. He then paraded the NWA world title belt around the inside of the ring so the fans could see it. When he signaled for the start of the match, neither Kiniski nor Funk wasted any time. They locked up quickly in an upright position before Funk applied a headlock on Kiniski. The hold didn't last because Kiniski, with a size and strength advantage, simply picked up Funk and stuck him on the corner ropes, then began beating on him. They went back and forth for twenty minutes, trading body slams, arm locks, and leg locks. When Kiniski repeatedly tried to pin Funk, Dory demonstrated an amazing ability to arch his back at some tough angles in order to avoid being pinned. Kiniski, on the other hand, showed tremendous power while escaping any attempted

pins by Funk.

Dory tried to apply his signature "spinning toe hold" on more than one occasion, but Kiniski kicked him hard enough to break the holds, and sent Dory flying backwards at least a couple of times. Dory finally locked the hold onto Kiniski and forced him to submit. After a three-year reign as world champion, Gene Kiniski surrendered the belt to Dory Funk, Jr.

"It was one of those ‘it can’t happen to me’ moments," said Gene Kiniski. "Late in the match, Dory went to work on my bad knee. I had no choice but to submit. When the referee signaled that Dory won the match, a hush came over the crowd. For a moment, the fans couldn’t believe that Dory had taken the world title from me. Then the Armory erupted with cheers for Dory. After all, he was the American and I was a Canadian. He was the obvious favorite. There was some great publicity generated from the match because it was shown later on television. Gordon Solie recapped

the match on Championship Wrestling from Florida, so we were in good hands. He was a class act and made sure that we [the wrestlers] were the key."

Jerry Prater described more of the technical advancements for CWF which followed the Kiniski/Funk world title match:

"After that, we shot a lot of film at various arenas and were able to edit segments into the weekly TV show. I put together a very functional production setup where Gordon could narrate the filmed action after it had been edited, and with magnetic sound, the quality was great. In the rare instance when such was needed, the narration could be redone. I even came up with a way to isolate the crowd noise separately and mix it with the narration, so we didn't have to use canned crowd noise; no big deal these days, but pretty innovative in 1969."

Gordon found another use for the newly acquired

production equipment purchased by the wrestling promotion. He asked Jerry Prater to film a 200-lap race at Golden Gate Speedway. It was Gordon's plan to syndicate the race on television. Jerry said it was a great idea and he agreed to Gordon's request. According to Jerry, there was only one problem: "The same guy had the lead for the entire race. There were no serious challenges from other drivers or thrilling accidents. Gordon could not distribute film of such a boring race."

More and more, Gordon's real success continued to emanate from the "squared circle," rather than the ovals. Wrestler Bob Roop was there when CWF was on the rise and said, "When I first met Gordon Solie in July 1969, he was the voice of Championship Wrestling from Florida. He was pleasant, jocular, very professional, and fun to be around. On interview days, the boys who were going to do promos were congregated inside the Sportatorium, and were present when other wrestlers were being interviewed. This was somewhat nerve-wracking for a rookie doing his

first televised interviews, but Gordon was very supportive. Jack Brisco was being pushed heavily at the time, and was a decent interview, but before Gordon paraded Jack's professional accomplishments, he generally set the stage by mentioning his amateur accolades. Gordon did the same for me. He gave me such a nice buildup that, before I had ever spoken a word, I felt credible. He was very helpful to all the boys, and also to CWF.

"Many of the boys weren't capable of personalizing each interview by mentioning the town, day, and special circumstance, if any. Gordon would do that for them, making it possible for those boys who basically did "stock," or generic interviews, to get the entire promotional message across. Those wrestlers who merely needed to have the microphone put in front of them in order to do an excellent interview didn't need Gordon's expertise, while others needed all the help they could get. Gordon was very good at placing himself in both roles. If his assistance

wasn't required, he would let the wrestler carry the day. Regardless of the situation, he was always there with a good intro, follow-up questions, and the pertinent information that would accomplish the promotional goal of the interview. He was a genuine professional, and he remained one throughout his career.

"Generally, Gordon was all business, but if time permitted, he was more than happy to help the boys pull a good rib on one of their contemporaries. For one of these ribs, he interviewed a married wrestler who had been sniffing around a well-known, indeed infamous, groupie at one of the towns. Alerted to this situation by the boys, Gordon alerted the camera operator to pretend to be taping before he introduced the wrestler. After initial comments by the victim, Gordon asked, 'Do you feel that having a full-body massage from (groupie's name) before your match relaxes you before you get in the ring?' The look on the wrestler's face, as he pictured his wife and family seeing this on TV, was priceless. The boys, of

course, had a great laugh at the victim's expense. It was also a great tension reliever for me, as a rookie. If those guys could joke around while doing their interviews, then maybe I could relax a bit while doing the same."

The athletes may have been laughing it up in the Tampa wrestling studio, but not across the bay at the racetrack. Al Lamphier was getting so much heat from the figure 8 drivers that he finally pulled the division from Sunshine's Speedway's impending 1969 Fourth of July card. Jimmy Mann of the St. Petersburg Times wrote that the drivers knew the holiday races on the previous 4th of July show drew 5,800 spectators, with more than 1,000 turned away. Lamphier tried to explain that the track needed a holiday crowd to offset expenses from the cards that were rained out, or those that drew poorly. When questioned more by Mann, Lamphier revealed that he normally guaranteed prize money of around $550, but had never paid out less than $700, and he offered more than $1,000 for the figure eights on the 4th of July show.

As the holiday got closer, a majority of the drivers finally relented and signed a petition saying they would like to race on the 4th of July.

During the same month as Roop's arrival in Florida, Gordon publicly expressed his sentiments for Marion Edwards, a late-model driver who died at New Smyrna Beach Speedway. Archie Blount, Gordon's buddy from the PRTA Club and the Tampa Times, wrote that Edwards' car crashed and burst into flames. The rescuers on the scene had only one fire extinguisher. Gordon was upset, not only because the man died, but because of the lack of safety equipment. He also was disturbed that a safety bill requiring tighter guidelines for oval and drag racing did not pass the legislature when submitted by Senator Knopke. According to Gordon, the least they had on hand at any time at the "Gate" was four extinguishers, and they had both chemical and foam extinguishers. They had more safety equipment than the laws required, but like other tracks, the "Gate" still had its share of accidents.

Although Gordon was concerned about safety improvements for the drivers, he was pleased with the popularity of stock car racing throughout Florida. In fact, Gordon wrote on the subject in August 1969:

> If you have ever doubted that auto racing is the number-one-attended sport in the United States (not including pari-mutuel sports), then take the next few minutes to explore with me the various types of auto competition available statewide. I think you will be somewhat surprised at the findings. First of all, in Tampa, you have Golden Gate Speedway with stock car racing every Friday and Saturday nights. Averages of 150 stock cars, in five divisions, compete over the two-night period (figure eight racing coming Aug 15 will raise that to two hundred) … ("Stock car")

The rising popularity of racing in Tampa was making it possible for Gordon to introduce figure-8 racing competition at Golden Gate Speedway, just like he had done five years earlier at Sunshine Speedway.

Gordon went on to mention Sunshine Speedway's three days of racing each week, Andy Miller's races in Sarasota on Fridays, Winter Haven on Saturdays, Butch Bryant's cards at the Fairgrounds Speedway in Dade City, weekly races at Citrus County Speedway, Dick Joplin's early models and sprint cars at Orlando Speedway, in addition to active tracks in Ocala, New Smyrna Beach, West Palm Beach, Hollywood, Punta Gorda, Jacksonville, St. Augustine, Melbourne, and Pensacola.

That didn't count the various drag racing events, or the NASCAR-sanctioned races run in Florida. It was Gordon's opinion that the different racetracks should alternate evenings during the week for their cards. That would give fans the opportunity to visit

tracks in the same week in different cities within reasonable driving distances. "I don't suppose that will ever happen but it appears to me that it would be better for the sport, better for the promoters, and better for the most important people of all … the racing fans…" stated Gordon.

More news of coming attractions in the auto world hit the press when Gordon wrote a column on October 3, 1969 titled "ABC-TV to film at Golden Gate." Gordon opened the article with, "The ABC Television network has again selected the Golden Gate Speedway in Tampa as the site of the annual stunt driving and auto crash contest that is seen on the nationwide television show, Wide World of Sports" (4C). TV crews were already in town preparing to shoot four hours of competition that would take place on October 12th and broadcast on Tampa's Channel 10 on November 10th. It was another impressive event at the "Gate" for auto enthusiasts and included the appearance of the defending champion, Max Seslar.

A few weeks later, a letter was passed on to Gordon written by a man named Nick Adams. The letter informed personnel at the Tampa wrestling office that Adams was going to be in town in December, and he was bringing a wrestler with him. The wrestler had appeared on television shows and movies such as Night of the Grizzly with Clint Walker, Walt Disney's Davy Crockett series, Daniel Boone with Fess Parker, Deep in the Forest, Caravan with Jack Palance, and the Bozo the Clown television show. He stood 7-foot-9, weighed 750 pounds, and was only six years old. He was an Alaskan Kodiak brown bear named Gentleman Ben.

Of all the showmen appearing in Tampa for racing and wrestling, no one seemed to get a bigger reaction than Boris Maxamilianovitch (The Great) Malenko. He was angry because he didn't like the written description about his match with the wrestling bear. In Wrestling Action, the souvenir program sold at the matches in Florida, Malenko said, "It seems I was forced against my will and

my better judgment to wrestle this savage wild animal. Now, I fear no man. But is it right, I ask you, to force a fine wrestler such as myself to compete against a carnivorous animal which had obviously been starved before the match? It was said that I threw something in the bear's eyes. Now I ask you. Would I do such a thing?"

Malenko claimed he was trying to wrestle the bear, but the bear went berserk. It was only self defense in a "wrestling turned law-of-the-jungle match." Still not satisfied, Malenko continued, "To show that I was not afraid, I offered to meet the bear again, but its handlers, fearing that I would make of it a bear skin rug, refused. I understand this creature will be in Florida soon. I have many friends here. You can be assured that one of them will attend to this refugee from a zoo."

Malenko's tag team partner, Baron Hans Mortier, swore to the staff of Wrestling Action, the souvenir program, that everything Malenko said was the truth. After listening to Malenko and Mortier,

Wrestling Action printed a response: "Personally, we feel like the bear has the more honest face."

The real honest face, according to the fans and wrestlers, belonged to the guy behind the microphone. Joe Turner, who was wrestling at the time as "Joe Sky," was partnered with Bill Bowman, aka "Bill Sky." "Gordon Solie gave the business some class," said Joe. "He was a first-rate announcer. He was very clear, he was very knowledgeable, and he was so smooth that he could present the business in words that the average fan could understand."

The recognition and notoriety Gordon was receiving created a need for him to find a special place away from the hustle and bustle in the city. He found just the place on Lake Keystone in rural Odessa, Florida. Along with the help of "Pops," his father-in-law, and a local contractor, Gordon built an A-frame house which faced the lake and offered a breath-taking view of Florida's natural beauty. Gordon decided on a brick exterior and

made arrangements to get the bricks in advance from an old hotel demolition in Tampa. He also petitioned for the right to name the street on which his new residence was located. Gordon's request was granted and he officially lived on "Solie Road."

The house became the focal point for many family gatherings and social activities. In the great room, which looked out onto the water, was a reminder of the past: a regulation-size pool table. The table was used at Christmas time for the Solie family pool tournament. Relatives on hand were welcome to join in a singles, as well as a double tournament. A plaque was hung on the wall and listed the various tournament winners from year to year. On the weekends, Gordon could relax in the privacy of the lake home and watch his beloved Tampa Bay sports teams. When he had business to attend to, Tampa was still a short drive from home.

Gordon was back in Tampa on November 8, 1970 for one of his favorite events, the Florida

Late Model Championships. The significance of the race went beyond Gordon's love of stock car racing. Between radio and TV studios, he spent a lot of time announcing indoors, and as much as he enjoyed that, it didn't hold a candle to Gordon broadcasting at a live event for thousands of cheering fans. He said there was no comparison. As Gordon handled the "wheel by wheel" announcing for the 200-lap championship, the Ohio state champion, Don Gregory, finally captured the biggest crown at the "Gate" after four previous attempts. It was definitely Gordon's type of enthusiastic crowd. Gregory told Archie Blount from the Tampa Times that he was totally overwhelmed after the race because a sea of fans from the crowd of 8,000 all wanted to personally shake his hand.

As soon as the state championships concluded, Gordon contacted a movie company in an effort to continue his quest of promoting stock car racing. Gordon kept an article titled "The Kids at Cannon," which was published in the August 31,

1970, issue of Time magazine. Robert T. Jones, the columnist who wrote the article, described the activities leading up to the new production. Many movie companies were lean at the time, but a group of companies in New York called the Cannon Group was looking to expand. One of their companies, Cannon Films, produced a distinctive line of low- to medium-budget films. They had a successful beginning with Swedish sex-life movies that had generated $4,000,000 in box office revenues, and then spent $300,000 to produce the movie, Joe (58), which starred Peter Boyle. Surprisingly, the box office revenues from Joe in New York City alone surpassed the cost of the film.

Jones also revealed the fact that the Cannon partners, Christopher C. Dewey and Dennis Friedland, planned a $2,000,000 budget to cover the release of six to eight movies, including one called Jump. Dewey, the president of Cannon, needed locations for the film's stock car racing scenes. He received a presentation from John

Bevis of the commerce department, and a pledge of cooperation from Tampa Mayor Dick Greco. Dewey then went to several different locations and was given a grand tour of racing facilities on the Suncoast by Gordon and Frank Dery. Later, at the Governor's Conference on Tourism, Dewey made an announcement that Cannon would be filming Jump in the Tampa Bay area. Gordon was chosen to be the technical advisor for the film.

The producer of the film Alice's Restaurant, Joe Manduke, was selected to direct the film, which had a budget of $500,000. That was a lot of money for a time when movie studios were limiting their budgets to $300,000 per picture, and less in many cases. Florida's Governor Claude R. Kirk, Jr. sent a letter on October 30, 1970 thanking Gordon on behalf of the people of Florida for his effort in bringing the Cannon film to Tampa.

In a contract from The Jump Company, Gordon's duties included providing stock cars and drivers for the scenes at Pasco County Speedway and

Golden Gate Speedway. Gordon turned to Dale Lewis of D&D Auto sales in Tampa for the acquisition of pennants, drivers, and cars for demolition. Plans were made for camera positions where crews would film the white-and-black-checkered racing flags, crowd scenes, and the action on the tracks.

The focus of the racing scenes was of a young stock car driver named Chester Jump [played by Tom Ligon] who was trying to find success in auto racing. In Bernie McGovern's column, he mentioned that Ligon had an earlier career role in Paint Your Wagon [1969] with Lee Marvin and Clint Eastwood. By taking the part in Jump, Ligon had to give up his role on ABC-TV's A World Apart and pass on a part in a movie with Shirley MacLaine.

The script was originally written with a Kentucky setting, but when Tampa was selected as the site for a majority of the shooting, the script was adapted to accommodate filming in Ybor City

and downtown Tampa. Restaurants like the Seabreeze in Tampa and Ybor City's Silver Ring Café were used as film locations. It became a fun project for many Tampa Bay area residents when filming began in December 1970.

Besides acting as the technical director for Jump, Gordon also intervened as a referee at times. Jim Gulley supplied an auto for a scene and the race car was supposed to receive a few dents. When the dust settled, the stock car was really smashed up, and Gulley got in producer Christopher Dewey's face. Columnist Jim Smith wrote in the Tampa Tribune that the argument ended abruptly when Gulley punched Dewey in the face and laid him out. Gordon smoothed things over and kept Gulley from being arrested. In a failed attempt to shoot another scene, Dewey hustled to get equipment put away when it began to rain. One of the drivers was horsing around on the track and went into some deliberate slides and other maneuvers he thought were fun. When Dewey motioned for him to stop, he kept going around the track. Angry because he

couldn’t get to his equipment, Dewey heaved a hunk of mud on the car’s windshield as the driver’s car roared by again. The next thing he knew, Dewey was running for his life with a stock car on his rear.

Movie making in Tampa was hot news, but so was television. The televised wrestling program coming out of Tampa had become Florida’s show of shows. Bernie McGovern wrote:

> Don’t look now, but the only television show going out of Florida on a regular basis is coming out of Tampa. It is “Championship Wrestling from Florida," produced in color every Thursday afternoon before a live audience at the Sportatorium on North Albany Avenue off Kennedy Boulevard." (8B)

Championship Wrestling from Florida received good ratings wherever it was aired, and Eddie

Graham credited the show's success to good wrestling cards and top production values. "Wrestling made television … and now television makes wrestling," stated Graham to McGovern.

Graham also explained to McGovern that at the August meeting of the National Wrestling Alliance, the promoters had discussed the possibility of producing a nationally televised wrestling show. Going from a regionally syndicated show to a national one was a big step, but the Tampa-based show was definitely a candidate. One of Graham's concerns was that, by going national, they would lose the personal touch. On the other hand, a national show could have a tremendous impact on amateur wrestling. Graham had already donated money for Tampa to host the upcoming 1971 Junior Olympic events the next year. Prior to that, it would have been Cowboy Luttrall speaking on behalf of the Tampa wrestling promotion, but he was eyeing retirement and Eddie Graham had gradually taken on more and more of the management duties.

Despite a change in leadership, Tampa's televised wrestling program continued to have a larger and larger audience. Cowboy Luttrall's health had been fading and Eddie Graham had gradually taken over running the business. As Eddie worked his way into the role of the recognized promoter, he had several things going for him: he was a veteran professional wrestler, he was already familiar with the Tampa wrestling promotion, he took over the CWF television show, which was syndicated on 16 Florida stations, and he had a star announcer by the name of Gordon Solie. Championship Wrestling from Florida also had changed from a black-and-white show to one aired in color since Gordon had first assumed the role as host. Roland Monteiga, owner of La Gaceta, published a story on January 29, 1971, telling of an award coming from the Governor's office for Gordon Solie and Championship Wrestling from Florida for "high ratings" and "fostering good sportsmanship." Monteiga wrote, "Much of the success of the program must go to Gordon Solie, who MC's the program. His high-

caliber presentation and performance has made it a hit with thousands of viewers" (24).

Eddie Graham, Don Curtis, and Jack Brisco were present on CWF when Gordon received the award as an "Outstanding Citizen," presented by John Bevis on behalf of Governor Ruben Askew, who was sworn in during January 1971. (see photo on next page) Besides Gordon's television accomplishments, Bevis also commended Gordon for his stock car racing publicity, and for bringing two major motion pictures, plus ABC-TV's Wide World of Sports, to Florida.

Although Gordon was heralded for his efforts in sports entertainment, he was in no way infallible. One of Gordon's more embarrassing nights as an entertainer happened at Golden Gate Speedway in April 1971. Gordon invited the world light heavyweight boxing champion, Bob Foster, and his challenger, Ray Anderson, to take part in the pre-race equipment lap parade. Besides generating publicity for the speedway, the appearance was

good advertisement for the Foster/Anderson fight the next evening at Curtis Hixon Hall in Tampa. As Gordon walked down the dimly lit stairway from the broadcast booth, he met some men who were coming up the stairway. In the darkness, Gordon smiled, reached out to shake hands, and said, "Hi, Bob."

"No, man, I'm Joe," was the response from the world heavyweight boxing champion, Joe Frazier (J. Selman C1). Even though the stairway was poorly lit, Gordon felt like an idiot because he knew good and well who Joe Frazier was. It worked out, anyway, as Gordon had a great time with Frazier, Anderson, Foster, and renowned boxing manager, Yank Durham, at the "Gate" that night.

The goof at the track with Joe Frazier was in no way the most embarrassing in Gordon's career. Before a daredevil feat one day, when it came time for Gordon to introduce well-known stunt driver, Joie Chitwood, Gordon's words came out, "Joey

Shitwood." It took some time for Gordon to live that one down.

The May 12, 1971 issue of Variety featured a full-page ad on the back cover for the movie Jump. Gordon hoped the film would be a success, and wrote periodic bits and pieces about the film in his weekly column for La Gaceta. Unfortunately, the reports from initial premieres of the movie were not good. There were praises about some of the racing scenes, but overall, the movie was a bust. Gordon thought some of the best racing action was removed during editing before the picture was released.

Gordon was happy, however, when Jack Brisco wrestled NWA world heavyweight champion Dory Funk, Jr. to a draw in front of the largest crowd ever to attend a sporting event at the Bayfront Center in St. Petersburg. The event garnered a lot of mainstream attention, not just for the fact that it was a sellout, but because of the exorbitant prices the fans were willing to pay for seats. By

comparison, according to reporter Tom Kelly, a 50-yard line ticket to the Super Bowl in New Orleans the month before could be purchased for $15, while field-level box seats to the World Series that year sold for $12.

Dory Funk shared his thoughts about the event that took place on June 19, 1971: "The night at the Bayfront Center was a ‘red carpet’ evening. Ringside seats went for $20, which was a high price at the time, but those seats sold out first. Fans who bought those tickets turned it into a fashion event because they dressed to kill that night. We could feel the excitement in the arena as the fans anticipated every move. If either Jack or I even got a takedown, the crowd erupted with cheers.

"Eddie Graham finally gave up trying to pick out a good night for Jack and me to meet in the ring because all of our cards were sellouts," continued Dory. "Finally, Eddie just booked Jack and me for seven nights in a row at each of the regular Florida venues. Besides selling out every show in Florida,

we sold out in Kiel Auditorium (St. Louis) and arenas in Japan. One of our assets at the time was Gordon Solie. We all benefited from Gordon's credibility. He worked so hard to get the credibility of the wrestlers over to the fans that people grew to know and love Gordon. While other announcers and wrestlers yelled and screamed, Gordon worked in an easy manner and was direct to the point. When he had something important to say, people quieted down so they could hear his words. And he worked well with other organizations, too. I wrestled in a tag team match on Championship Wrestling from Florida and lost when Johnny Weaver got the winning pinfall. That set up Weaver for a singles bout against me for a world heavyweight title match up in Crockett's territory. Gordon interviewed me on CWF to help promote the match, even though it was for another promotion, and we packed the place in Greensboro."

Attendance at live wrestling events skyrocketed due to the increased popularity of the televised

wrestling program. More people than ever saw and heard Gordon on TV. Jacksonville had 67,000 viewers tune in to CWF on Saturdays. In other markets, Miami had 24,000, Orlando 51,000, Tampa 52,000, and West Palm Beach 55,000. Compared to the West Palm Beach numbers in the same time slot, Major League Baseball came in second in the ARB statistics with 19,000 viewers, while American Bandstand was next with 9,000.

Shortly after the Bayfront wrestling card, Gordon received a congratulatory letter dated June 30, 1971 from Dick Greco, the mayor of Tampa. The Florida Bar Association had singled out Gordon for the Radio Editorial of the Year award for his WYOU Radio editorial on first-time marijuana offenders. Outspoken as usual, Gordon said that penalties at the time were too severe for young, first-time offenders who got caught with one or two marijuana cigarettes. Although Gordon wasn't advocating the use of marijuana, he saw too many students sitting in jail, and thought that was wrong. Instead, Gordon believed authorities should crack

down on the drug pushers.

On July 16, 1971, La Gaceta published "Solie on Sports" on page 16 and featured Gordon's story about one of his acquaintances from the world of racing, a man named Don Garlits. Gordon pointed out that Garlits was born in Shippendale, Pennsylvania, but his family moved him shortly afterward to Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Although he grew up to become a good high school athlete in football and track, Don's real love at the time was drag racing. Don captured his first Florida state championship in his class in 1956 and never looked back. Gordon wrote that Garlits had again won the nationals in 1971. "Big Daddy," as Don Garlits was nicknamed, is considered as the "father of drag racing."

As for the local track, Golden Gate Speedway set a new record for the regular season that year, but it wasn't a record to be proud of. The track had 22 rainout dates, and those hurt the pocketbook. On top of that, environmental agencies were crying

about issues like noise pollution and air pollution at the track, and there was pressure to install special mufflers on the race cars.

The racing season was slow, but the popularity of televised wrestling was soaring in Tampa in 1971. In fact, the television show's success made it possible for a second "Solie" to join the ranks of CWF. Gordon's son, Greg, began as a part-time photographer while he was a sophomore in college. He gradually learned how to shoot and edit 16mm film so highlights from the arena matches could be seen on television. Eventually, Greg helped format the shows and became the assistant director. When the director resigned, Greg began producing and directing CWF.

During the Christmas season, Tampa wrestlers reached out into the community. Gordon, Eddie Graham, Mike Graham, and Jack Brisco went to St. Lawrence School, where they talked to attentive students and had a great Q&A session. At another fund-raiser, Don Curtis joined the four men

to perform at the Marine Corp. reserve training center. In La Gaceta, Gordon stated that the price of admission was a toy and everything collected at the door went to Toys for Tots.

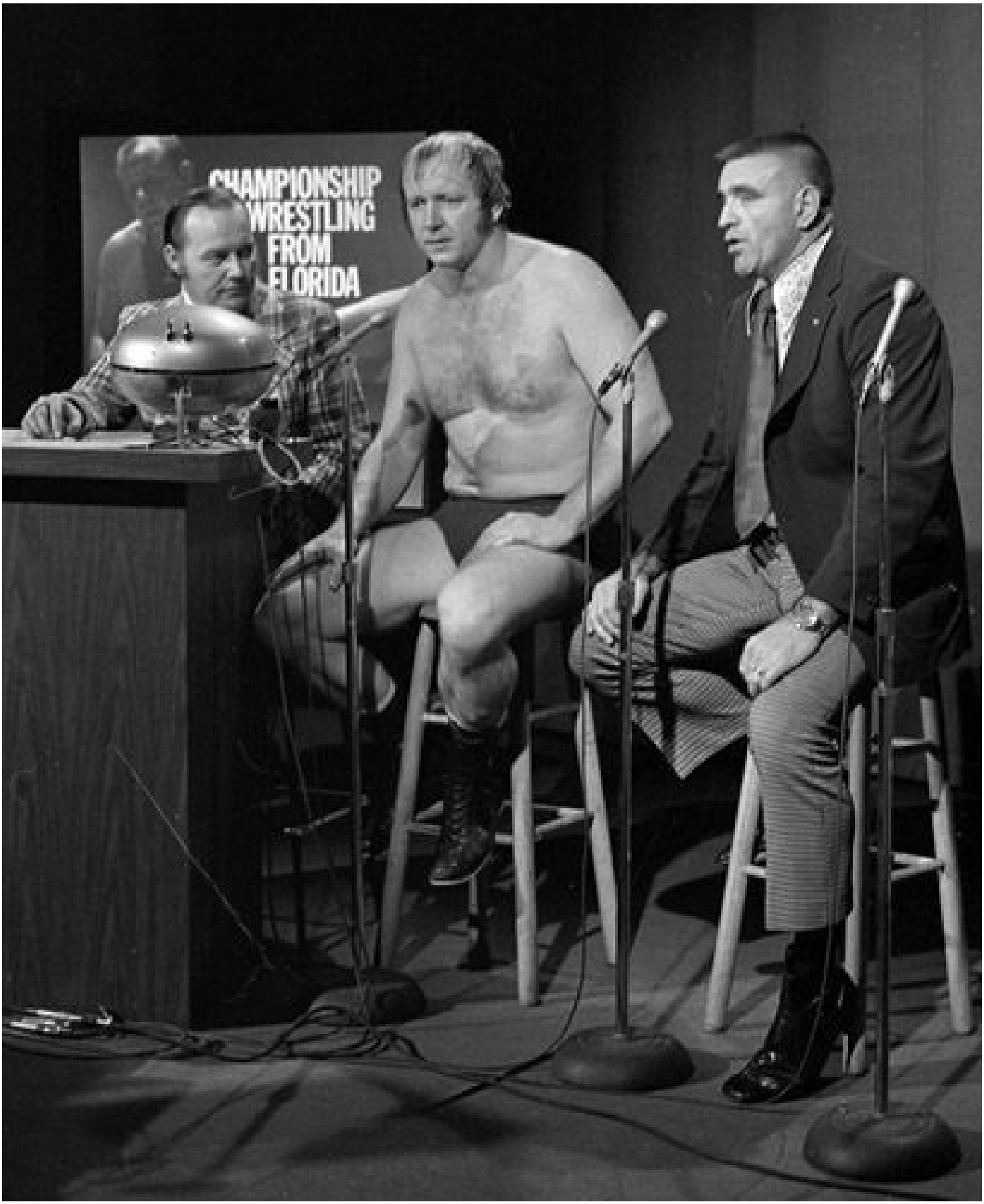
The final wrestling show in the Tampa Bay area for 1971 was held on Christmas night in St. Petersburg. More than 7,700 fans jammed into the Bayfront Center to see Mr. Wrestling [Tim Woods] win a 22-Man battle royal. The following day, the St. Petersburg Times printed a positive article about the show, and included comments made by Al Leggat, the manager of the Bayfront Center. Leggat had been singing praises about Eddie Graham's wrestling cards, and how they had helped generate revenue which helped cover the costs of operating the arena. In an interview that appeared in the St. Petersburg Times, Leggat said, "I love it. I'm trying to squeeze in more dates. I wish I could cancel a couple of hockey dates to get this in here" (Times Wire Service).

A few days later, the St. Petersburg Times

printed a letter from a reader named Everett Williams in their column, "The Hot Corner." Williams made cynical comments about professional wrestling and, in general, made fun of it. Two days later, Jerry Prater, a CWF promoter, responded in the letter section of the newspaper:

> Read The Hot Corner last Sunday and I must say the comments made about wrestling by Mr. Everett Williams didn't impress me as being nearly as funny as he seemed to think they were. I've seen better attempts at sophisticated humor on public restroom walls!
> If Mr. Williams would really like to meet the "educational TV wrestling champion," I'd be more than happy to introduce him to someone superbly qualified to hold such a title. Let him come prepared to wrestle, and the education will be on us. (Red Hot Corner)

Chapter 6: The Abusive Polack



Gordon talks with Dory Funk Jr. and Don Curtis on the set of *Championship Wrestling from Florida* (1972)

1972 was Gordon's 22nd anniversary of his association with professional wrestling. As he looked back to 1950 and his first interviews with the grapplers Gordon said, "For the most part, the athletes today are bigger, stronger, in better shape, are better educated, and make a hell of a lot more money."

The wrestling promotion that originally catered to crowds of 500 at Tampa's McKay Auditorium had grown to include a television program syndicated throughout Florida, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and San Juan, Puerto Rico plus numerous other markets. Gordon wrote:

> Today, there are more college graduates in pro wrestling than ever before. Some outstanding examples of great athletes and competitors include Jack Brisco, the current heavyweight champion of Florida, who was All-Oklahoma twice and NCAA national

champion; Bob Roop, All-Army champion, AAU champion, representing the United States in the Olympics; Dale Lewis, All-Marine champion; Mr. Wrestling, who wrestled in the Pan American Games for the United States, and holds several collegiate titles; Ken Lusk, a collegiate champion from Brigham Young, and many more. ("Solie on")

While reminiscing, Gordon described the legendary incident where the Great Malenko was biting the ear of Sam Steamboat, the tag team partner of Eddie Graham. When Eddie saw what was happening, he jumped into the ring and hit Malenko so hard that Malenko's false teeth flew out of his mouth and onto the canvas. Graham proceeded to jump up and down on Malenko's false teeth, and then kicked the broken parts all over the ring. As part of the storyline, it was reported that Malenko sued and eventually got reimbursed for his teeth.

While talking about his opponents during

interviews with Gordon, Malenko would pause, look straight into the lead camera and spin the pupils of both eyes simultaneously, creating an insane, but humorous, image. Afterwards, he would turn to Gordon briefly, and then look back to the lead camera for his standard close, "There is no competition for the "Great Malenko!"

Jerry Prater wrote more about Gordon's memorable moments:

> At this point, it should be mentioned that, his ringside seat notwithstanding, Solie seldom looks at the ring, but instead, describes the action from a television monitor. "Karl Von Brauner has Christy in a hammerlock," Gordon Solie was saying. "This can be a very painful hold … but Christy breaks free and comes back with a forearm smash. Now the German catches his arm and hurls him into the ropes, and he goes right through." The crash

> that followed was the result of the huge, powerful Christy almost landing in Solie's lap, demolishing the table and platform, and sending Solie sprawling to the floor.
> Solie had been watching his monitor, and while he had seen Christy thrown out of the ring, he'd seen it from the angle the TV cameras were shooting, and didn't realize the man was headed straight for him. (12-14)

Gordon was uninjured, and Christy got up and went right back into the ring. Prater noted that before and after matches, wrestlers were usually talkative and looked forward to the exposure of an interview. On one occasion, however, Gordon interviewed a young wrestler who just happened to be camera shy, and no matter what Gordon asked the man, the guy only said "yes" or "no." Evidently, Gordon asked the man everything from his childhood to his thoughts on America's space program. "That was a long eleven minutes," Gordon told Prater.

On February 8, 1972, thousands of fans, all hoping to buy tickets at the Bayfront Center in St. Petersburg for a world title match between Dory Funk, Jr. and Jack Brisco, were turned away at the door. Gordon handled the play-by-play commentary for a solid 60 minutes. To the relief of champion Funk, and the frustration of Brisco, the match ended in a draw.

It was obvious the fans were thrilled with the show because the more than 7,000 in attendance paid a record Bayfront Center gate of around $50,000.

In an article printed the next morning in the St. Petersburg Times, staff writer Tom Duffy made highly disparaging remarks about the show … and wrestling, in general. Comments included "Some of the punches miss farther than in a Grade B Western," and "This play is good for several more performances."

In the past, wrestling promoters in Tampa always

ignored the media when they poked fun at their product, but this was the proverbial “straw that broke the camel’s back." Two days after the show, at the taping of Championship Wrestling from Florida, an obviously angry Eddie Graham appeared with Gordon at the opening of the program. Scott Teal made a reel-to-reel recording of the segment and published the transcript in the February 1972 issue of his wrestling newsletter, the Tampa Scene. Eddie made the following comments:

> I don’t think that in this stage of my life I have to be defending my personal integrity, and that’s certainly not my intent. But, on behalf of all the thousands of wrestling fans over in the St. Petersburg area, and to enlighten a lot of the overtaxed citizens, I felt compelled or obligated to at least make these few statements.
> Now Gordon, I didn’t wrestle twenty-three

years of my life for money alone, through a broken jaw when I was nineteen years old, a broken leg when I was twenty-one years old, a busted back when I was twenty-nine years old — right here in Florida — a broke nose, broke hands, all these things, and I didn't do all that for money alone, and I don't promote wrestling just for money alone. I take a lot of pride in bringing to the Tampa Bay area the best athletes that this country ever produced — and the toughest.

Now, about a year and a half ago, the late Mr. Ed French, manager of the Bayfront Center, came over to Tampa and talked to me, and he said, 'Eddie, as you know, our Bayfront Center over here is losing about two-hundred thousand dollars a year operating in the red.' And he said, 'It's my job to try to get it out. It's costing taxpayers, it's costing everything.' Now, I am a little hot Gordon, so I hope you'll bear with me. (Gordon: 'I understand.') So I don't think I need to remind you that there has not been one worthwhile

project come in the last twelve years around this area that I didn't respond to — voluntarily or if I was asked — so I set about to try to see what I could do, and any promoter or any man undertaking any business venture takes some kind of a risk. Well, anyway, last Tuesday night, I flew athletes in here from Tokyo, Japan, Baba; from Houston, Texas, Johnny Valentine; from Amarillo, Texas, Dory Funk, Jr.; from Detroit, Michigan, The Sheik … and through all of that I was able to pay the Center, the St. Petersburg Center, over six-thousand dollars in rentals, parking fees, employed the concession people, and a lot of things. People came in from four-hundred to five-hundred miles out for the matches, they spent money at the restaurants, the motels, and I don't think that's much of a joke to the people that are running those businesses.

Now then, to the point: I called Mr. Leggat yesterday and I canceled all the future dates in the Bayfront Center, and I mean they're

canceled for good. And I did it because of a ridiculous, slanderous article by the St. Petersburg Times, ridiculing what I think and I'm ready to prove are the best athletes that this country's ever produced. The card was loaded with former national collegiate champions, and they don't wrestle just for the money either — they've wrestled half of their lives for honor, and glory, and medals, and representing this country. And I get a little sick, or I can't help but wonder, how long that guys like Jack Brisco, and [Bob] Roop, and Tim Woods, and all of those people, have to be ridiculed for some stigma from thirty years ago, any more than a modern baseball player should be ridiculed because of the Black Sox scandal, or because some basketball player should be run out of town because there's been some bribes took place in it. You know, I can't quite live with that!

Now, to make myself crystal clear: I've got a check made out here for ten-thousand dollars. It is signed and the name is open. I hope that

they can find somebody that'll come over here. All you gotta do to get that is to come over here — or we'll come over there — and sign a release for your injuries, climb in the ring, and beat a wrestler, and the ten-thousand dollars is yours.
And Gordon, while we're waiting for that to happen, I suggest that if the people over in St. Petersburg get tired of being taxed to death, they go down and see that forty-dollar clown, and if he's just half as smart as he'd like people to think he is, I'm sure that he can come up with something that'll contribute ten-thousand dollars a night to the Bayfront Center. (2,3)

On the following Monday, Eddie wrote a letter to the city manager of St. Petersburg, expanding on the subject:

Eddie Graham to
Raymond E. Harbough, City Manager, St. Petersburg FL

February 14, 1972:

Dear Mr. Harbough:

L & G Promotions, Inc., promoters of professional wrestling in the Tampa-St. Petersburg area, is one of the most respected and influential wrestling organizations in the United States. We have been successful because we have hewed closely to a policy of offering our customers the finest wrestling talent available, from either the United States or abroad.

For over twenty-five years, our Tuesday night programs have been a fixture at the Fort Hesterly Armory in Tampa. During the past year, at the urging of Mr. Al Leggat, manager of Bayfront Center, we have tried to schedule several of our bigger events in that building. Mr. Leggat tempted us to use Bayfront by pointing out its greater seating capacity, more comfortable seating, vast parking facilities, and excellent lighting for our events. In addition, we found him and the entire Bayfront staff to be efficient and courteous.

In private talks, Mr. Leggat told us he wanted the bigger gates wrestling would bring Bayfront because he was determined to operate the building at a profit rather than at the substantial loss basis that has existed since it was opened. We gathered that deficit amounted to over $200,000 last year alone, all of it being a direct charge to the taxpayers of St. Petersburg. We might say here that we applaud this position of Mr. Leggat, who evidently understands, as too few municipal employees do, that he works for the people of St. Petersburg, and the interest of taxpayers must be of paramount importance to him.

For our program of February 8, we paid Bayfront Center $6,073.64 rent. Further, we paid the wages of the following citizens of St. Petersburg that night: 12 policemen, 60 ushers, 15 maintenance men to set up for the program and 30 of the same to tear down, as well as numerous other ticket sellers, stagehands, electricians, etc. The parking concession from which the building generates

considerable income was a complete sell-out. We do not know how much the food and drink concession grossed, but they operated to capacity for the entire evening.

Customers came from all over Florida and from outside the state to view the program which had as its main event a world championship match. Many of these patrons stayed overnight in St. Petersburg, which brought income to hotel and motel operators, and it must be assumed that restaurant operators and other merchants of St. Petersburg also received considerable extra income that date due to the scheduled wrestling event.

We spent a considerable sum of money in newspaper advertising for this event. In the St. Petersburg Times-Evening Independent, we ran ten column inches a total of eleven days. The same was true of the Clearwater Sun. It may be interesting to you to know that in Tampa, where we run regularly, professional wrestling, in 1971, spent more

for advertising in the Tampa Tribune-Times than all the following professional sports put together: football, basketball, baseball, tennis, hockey, golf, horse racing, and boat racing.

The foregoing is merely to remind you that professional wrestling as conducted by L & G Promotions is a successful and important enterprise that generates great interest among many thousands of citizens of our area, and pays its way in a prompt and honorable fashion.

Since we first ran a program at Bayfront Center, however, your sports writers (St. Petersburg Times and Evening Independent) have conducted a vicious and slanderous campaign against us. By suggestion, innuendos and outright falsehoods, they have portrayed our wrestling activities in such a way as to insult not only our athletes, but our customers as well. Exemplifying this viciousness is the statement in the February 9 issue of the Times that "there is profanity,

violence and nudity in professional rasslin'."
If these papers wished to drive us out of St. Petersburg, they have accomplished their purpose. We have cancelled a March date we had scheduled in Bayfront Center and have advised Mr. Leggat we will not run programs there again. Advertising normally appearing in the Times-Independent for matches running in smaller cities in this area will not be used in the future.

We are proud to promote professional wrestling. We think our contestants are among the greatest athletes in the land. We make no apologies for such athletes as Bob Roop, former collegiate star who represented the United States at the Mexico City Olympics; Jack Brisco, former NCAA national heavyweight champion; Dale Lewis, twice NCAA national heavyweight wrestling champion, and other such fine mat stars who have chosen the professional ranks as their way of life.

We will continue to promote the finest

professional wrestling contests possible, but we will not do so in St. Petersburg, where newspaper vilification casts a cloud on both the honor and intent of not only we who promote, but on the wrestlers as well.
Sincerely,
Eddie Graham.
CC: City Council; City Editors, Times and Independent; Manager, Bayfront Center

Eddie sent a copy of the letter to National Wrestling Alliance president Sam Muchnick, along with a personal note:

Eddie Graham to Sam Muchnick
February 15, 1972:
I have been very busy with the big show, etc. We just had the biggest week in the history of our business.
I am attempting something I don't believe has been done before. The St. Pete Times has knocked our shows, so following the big one, I cancelled all future shows there, and offered

$10,000 to anyone who could beat a wrestler. I put the blame on the paper; the building is losing about $200,000 per year; we paid $6,000 rent last show. Will keep you posted. Sam, I appreciate very much your remarks in your letter, but in my present state of mind, I think it best, and am submitting my proxy to you, to vote as you see fit until new directors are elected.

I need some time to decide if my ideals ever really had a place in wrestling.

Sincerely,

Eddie Graham

On the same date, Eddie sent a letter to all members of the National Wrestling Alliance:

Eddie Graham to Members, National Wrestling Alliance

February 15, 1972:

Gentlemen: As you know, we recently reached a milestone in pro wrestling. I am referring to the championship match between

Dory Funk, Jr. and Jack Brisco, at the Bayfront Center in St. Petersburg. The milestone I refer to was a $20.00 ringside, with $12, $8 and $5 to see a scientific match. We had no problem under the price freeze, not even a question, but were prepared by having some outside stars on the card. Following the show, a very liberal newspaper, the St. Petersburg Times, wrote a stinking article; well, I believe another milestone will be reached. Our last three shows in Bayfront Center were sellouts. I just cancelled all future dates for wrestling in the building, went on TV and told the people why. I said I had the best athletes this country ever produced and offered the paper $10,000 to find anyone to beat a wrestler. The public is solid behind us and proud we stood up. The president of the newspaper has called and pleaded for us to talk to them; so far I told them to go to hell. I hope it could start a trend to stop some of the ass-kicking the business has taken for years. I will keep everyone

posted on the outcome.
In closing, let me mention one other thing. We lost our regular building in Miami Beach to some clowns who, with no experience in wrestling promotion, bid 18½ per cent of gate receipts for rent. We did not bid for one very good reason: if we paid 18½ per cent rent, it could spread across the country and rape the wrestling industry of hundreds of thousands of dollars in the future. We intend to continue promoting the Miami area in other buildings not as suitable, but felt we had to make this stand to protect everyone in the business. Building managers do have conventions and talk about how to make more money.
Regarding my resignation as a director, I know everyone received Sam's last bulletin. I appreciate very much his confidence and kind remarks, however I don't make rash decisions and wasn't playing a game. If I have contributed half as much as some of you say, it should entitle me to bow out gracefully which is all I want to do. I truly believed in

the past that I was helping the business; now I can't help but wonder if my ideals ever had a place in the business. In this frame of mind, I think it best and have sent Sam my proxy to vote on any matters until new directors are elected.
Sincerely,
Eddie Graham

Sam Muchnick replied to Eddie in turn:

Sam Muchnick to Eddie Graham
February 18, 1972:
Your nice letter of Feb. 15 received and you may rest assured that I will respect your wishes. At this time, I contemplate no meetings of the directors, anyway, so everything now depends on our convention in Las Vegas.
Your ideals are splendid and they do have a place in our business – only more should have those ideals. I, too, have ideals, and sometimes I, too, think that they don't belong

in our business. But we do have some fine people in our organization or else it would not have lasted for 24 years. What we need is more communication with each other; more understanding of each other, and more feeling of trust among each other.

I have lived and fought for this business almost 40 years. It has made me a fine living, and for this reason, I have stayed on as president of the NWA more years than I wanted to and have really sacrificed financially by staying on. That is why I have definitely decided that I will not accept another term. I have not made this public because I want 100% attendance at the convention, but I will give sufficient notice so that the boys can have time to determine a successor.

Eddie, I have studied you ever since we became closer in the last few years and I have great admiration for you. So do many others in our business. The few that may be critical should first take stock of themselves before

throwing any stones.
Am very sorry about the St. Petersburg situation and hope it clears up. I have been through those kinds of things in the past and know they take the heart out of you after you have worked so hard for success. Wish you would send me the news stories in question, and maybe in my small way, I can be of help. In the meantime, don't move too fast on this. Time heals all wounds.
When we are together, which I hope is soon, I will relate a few of my experiences on the issues of a bad press when I worked for Tom Packs. But all worked out for the best.
I have been talking about a real vacation for years and haven't been able to take the time. Even in the hospital, I had to run my business from bedside. But next month, I hope I can take a week off and take Helen and Kathy to Miami. When Kathy goes back to school, Helen and I may find time to spend a few days in Tampa or St. Pete and we can do lots of talking, you and I – which I always enjoy.

In the meantime, keep cool and I know all will work out. Your friend,
Sincerely,
Sam Muchnick.

Due to Gordon's notoriety from televised events like the Funk/Brisco shows, it was not uncommon for people to discuss wrestling with him, even when he was off the job. The subject of "pro wrestling" came up one day during a conversation with some visitors at the Solie lake house, and one of them immediately blared out, "That professional wrestling is all faked." In a nanosecond, Gordon blasted his guest: "These are the best conditioned athletes in the world. If you think it's so fake, then come down to the Armory and work out with these guys." Gordon's guest didn't have much more to say about pro wrestling during the visit. The promoters of wrestling in Florida had a standing offer for years for anybody who thought they could beat a pro wrestler in the ring. "It was put up originally for any pro boxer who wanted a go in a mixed match, but there have been no takers,"

declared Gordon.

Gordon and Smoky did their fair share of entertaining at the Lake Keystone home on Solie Road, and settled into a comfortable and stylish lifestyle. It was a good thing they entertained at home because Gordon's schedule didn't allow much time for the family to go away as a group on vacation. By 1972, two additional members were added to the immediate family, bringing the total number of Solie family members living in the Tampa area to seven. After graduating from high school, Jonard moved to Florida from Illinois, and Pam was living in Tampa with her husband, Bob Allyn. Dannie was married, and Eric and Greg were in and out of the house, depending on college sessions. When Jonard arrived in Florida, it was like, "Oh, by the way, this is your brother, and he'll be moving in upstairs." It meant a lot to Gordon to have all five children in close proximity, especially if they could be with him and Smoky on holidays. The "rules of engagement" between Gordon and Smoky were still in place,

but had been modified over time.

It wasn't an easy situation for any of the children. After Gordon and Betty divorced, Pam and Jonard moved with their mother and merged into a brand new family, into a new house, and into a new town more than 1,200 miles away from their father. They had a new stepfather, a new stepbrother, and two new stepsisters. To make matters more complicated, their mother gave birth to a son, Kenneth, which meant a new half-brother. In Florida, Danise, Greg and Eric lost their father to heart disease and inherited a new stepfather when Gordon married Smoky. Almost a decade had passed since they were merged into a new family unit with Gordon as their dad. All of a sudden, two more siblings were present at family functions … two siblings they knew virtually nothing about.

Gordon's name wasn't nearly as well known when he first married Smoky, but his recognition as an entertainer had grown considerably. Greg described what it was like growing up in Tampa

with a recognizable last name: "It was a mixed blessing growing up with the Solie name during the peak of the popularity of the local wrestling promotion. It seemed that everyone knew Gordon. At times, there was a benefit to the notoriety, and at others, it was a hindrance. Sometimes it opened doors that would have otherwise not been there, and sometimes it brought up endless conversation on professional wrestling that seemed totally out of place. It was difficult to be your own person."

At the Solie house, a knock on the door produced immediate results as five small poodles responded with their barks. An animal lover since childhood, Gordon also had "Quickdraw," a Macaw parrot, and a monkey named "Monty." Greg said the bird was named after the cartoon character "Quickdraw McGraw," and the monkey was named after the film actor, Monty Woolley, who was popular in the 1940s.

Smoky's father, Pops, was in his late 70s, but stayed very active with outdoor work and taking

care of the animals. Although his fingers were crippled with arthritis, Pops still shot a mean game of pool, and enjoyed a boilermaker [a shot of whiskey and a beer] during the process, while displaying a partially chewed cigar in the corner of his mouth. No one ever spoke ill of Pops. He was a lovable guy and a good grandfather.

Monty could make Pops laugh one moment, and then irritate him the next. When he was outside, Monty was kept on a leash so he could climb up his favorite palm tree. Monty had his own blanket which, strangely enough, he would spread on the ground so he could lie down in the sun. Inside the house, Monty had a large cage in a room just off the kitchen. Although Pops carefully planned and served him a special diet of fruit, Monty let everyone know if any of the food was objectionable by shaking his cage so loudly that the rattling was heard throughout the house.

Like most conscientious parents, Gordon and Smoky wanted to know if their children arrived

safely when heading back to college or another destination some distance from home. Cell phones had not yet been invented, so the children would call home on a regular land line. In order to avoid long-distance phone charges and still let Gordon and Smoky know they arrived safely, the children would place a person-to-person call for Monty. Whoever answered the phone simply replied, "I'm sorry, he's all caged up at the moment." or "He's all tied up right now." It wasn't about saving money as much as it was the fun of trying to come up with a catchy phrase when denying the call.

When Gordon left the lake house for work, his typical daily schedule included stopping by "Pit Stop," one of Gordon's enterprises. Pit Stop was a full service BP station in downtown Tampa that was formed when Gordon set up the Racer Corporation, a company designed to service vehicles, sell auto parts, and sponsor race cars. While there, he would check his phone messages and make business calls. From there, he drove to the Sportatorium at 106 N. Albany in Tampa to

check on business for CWF. For lunch, he would go to the Redwood Lounge, where he would eat a sandwich and down two or three double vodkas. WYOU Radio was next on his list for his broadcast of the previous evening's sports news. After another trip to Pit Stop, Gordon would go to Malio's, one of his all-time favorite watering holes. He drank in the club side of Malio's in the afternoon and chatted with local politicians or businessmen.

Gordon likened his love of the "spirits" to two things received from his biological father, Frank. One was an alcoholic gene, and the other was the capacity to be a "mean" drunk. As evidenced by his daughter, Pam, the relationship between Gordon and Frank was nonexistent. She had a chance to visit with her grandfather, Frank, a recovering alcoholic, during a trip to Minneapolis. His second wife, Amy, was a sweet woman, and together with Frank, they sired two children, Mary Lee and Jerome. Sadly, Gordon would never meet his half-sister and half-brother. When Pam asked

Frank about the lack of communication with her dad, he really didn't have much of an answer. Instead, he held up his index finger and motioned for her to wait. She watched him enter another room and open an old, weathered trunk. From the trunk, Frank pulled out an old shoe box, tied with brown wrapping string. Pam watched her grandfather's every move with anticipation. Silently, Frank sat down next to his granddaughter and carefully opened the shoebox. Inside was a pair of age-worn baby shoes. That was all the man had in reference to his own son. It was sad.

The fact that Gordon took on the "mean drunk, abusive Polack" part of his father was a disappointment to Gordon. He once said, "I wish I had some of his good qualities. I do take pride that I'm fifty percent Polish. Among other attributes, the Poles have a great appreciation for art, be it music, painting, writing, or, of course, Smirnoff Vodka. Let's not forget that."

Although Gordon was a high-functioning

alcoholic, his drinking was not always without problems. While driving back to his house one night, for example, and while under the influence, he drove his car into a tree. Luckily, he was close to home, nobody was injured, and he could walk to his house. He quickly called his attorney, who told him to make sure he was drinking when the police arrived. When the officer walked into the house, Gordon downed a glass full of vodka right in front of him. The policeman said, "You're drinking?"

"Of course I am," replied Gordon. "I just ran my car into a godda— tree." The officer could not charge him with a DUI. It was a little too late for that.

On another occasion, while Gordon was drinking in a bar near downtown Tampa, in walked Jody Hamilton, aka the Assassin. Normally, Jody would have been wrestling in Miami on a Wednesday evening, but there were no matches that particular night. The bartender was the wife of wrestling manager, Homer O'Dell. She knew Gordon and

Jody, so she was very generous with the alcohol content in their drinks. When the bar closed, Jody wasn't feeling any pain, but he was still in control of his senses. Gordon had been drinking even before he got to the bar, so by the time they left, Gordon was, in Jody's words, "blotto." Jody offered to drive Gordon home, but Gordon vehemently refused. Gordon finally agreed that he wouldn't drive until he had taken a little catnap. Jody helped Gordon into his car and Gordon immediately passed out. Before he left, Jody thought he'd have a little fun, so he turned the radio in Gordon's Mercedes to full volume, moved the heater switch to the highest setting, and then turned on the wipers and any other device he could find. Gordon awoke the next morning to the sound of a cop's baton tapping on the car window. "You can't park here at this time of day," barked the officer. Gordon acknowledged the order and turned his ignition key. The radio alone was enough to bring Gordon completely to his senses. Later that day, Gordon saw Jody and said, "Damn you. You almost gave me a heart attack."

Despite his alcoholism, Gordon won over all the skeptics and developed a tremendous amount of credibility for his work in the racing industry, and he was gaining the same respect in wrestling. As far as being a businessman … well, he just wasn't a good one. Gordon did well as an announcer, broadcaster, and public relations man, but whenever he went into business for himself, he usually lost money. Pit Stop was a good example of that.

Pit Stop was the hub of his corporation and the business did well at first. Accounts like Booker Trucking, which brought in their fleet of vehicles for fueling, helped cover his overhead. He also brought in a detective agency which had twelve vehicles. Several of the wrestlers, like Malenko, Paul Jones, and Mike Graham, brought their cars in for servicing. In addition to fuel, he stocked tires for sale.

The head mechanic at Pit Stop was Jim Oxley, and a man nicknamed "Cuban Bob" was brought on

full-time, as well. Gordon's son-in-law, Bob Allyn, managed the front of the store and tallied the daily receipts. Eric, Greg and Jonard worked on a part-time basis when possible, and Gordon brought in a couple of thrill-show performers during the off-season. One was Jerry, aka Happy the Clown, who entertained fans at the "Gate" during the off-season from his usual duties traveling with the Tournament of Thrills Auto Daredevils. He missed most of the second half of the season when a premature explosion in a stunt car damaged his eye. Two years before, a two-inch explosive blew off two of his fingers. Each day, Jerry had at least one verbal altercation with Cuban Bob. When they engaged in a heated discussion, Bob would mock Jerry by folding his fingers and act like he was talking with his knuckles: "Okay, no fingas. Whatever you say, no fingas." Jerry normally responded with his own comebacks, including sign language from one of his remaining fingers.

Gordon decided to take advantage of a government program which paid half of an ex-

convict's wages for the first 17 weeks after his release, so he hired two ex-cons, both of whom had experience as a mechanic. One said he had five years of experience working on vehicles in the motor pool at San Quentin State Prison. He was, in fact, a good mechanic, but he continued to abuse the drugs which put him away in the first place. The second man, called "Big Bob," had served a prison term for armed robbery. He looked physically fit and resembled a smaller version of professional wrestler "Sailor" Art Thomas.

Big Bob was polite, hard working, and seemed to get along well with others. That changed a bit one day around lunchtime. Bob Allyn was in the first bay near the entrance to the upstairs office when he saw Big Bob walk around the corner with his right hand in his coat pocket. Big Bob pulled out a gun. While aiming the pistol at Allyn, Big Bob said, "I want to see Mr. Solie."

As they made their way up the stairs to the office, Allyn managed to get some details. When Allyn

entered the upstairs office, Gordon looked up from his desk and said, "What's up, Babe?" "Babe" was a standard hello or goodbye from Gordon. As Allyn moved closer, Big Bob emerged from behind him and stationed himself where he could keep the gun on both men. "Big Bob wants to talk to you," said Allyn. "From what I gather, someone stole his tool box. He set it down outside for a second, ran back to get something he forgot, and when he went back, the toolbox was gone."

Big Bob seemed nervous as he moved the gun back and forth between the two men. Gordon stood up from behind the desk and yelled angrily: "Bob, put the gun down, now!" Big Bob dropped his shoulders in submission, turned his hands with palms up, and walked over and put the gun on the desk. Gordon reached down with his left hand, opened the top drawer of the desk, picked up the gun, and put it in the drawer. He then walked past Allyn and placed his arm around Big Bob's shoulder. "Come on. Let's go work this out." It wasn't long before Allyn noticed Gordon reach

into his pocket and stick some cash in Big Bob's hand to replace the stolen tools. That was Gordon Solie. He liked to help people.

The cash Gordon pulled out his pocket was in no way unusual. He normally had a money clip full of hundred-dollar bills and he helped many people in need. Often, he just gave people money from his pocket, while at other times, if someone needed a larger amount, he assisted them in making arrangements for a loan. Either way, many people were indebted to Gordon because of his generosity. It was almost impossible to beat him to the check if someone accompanied him to a restaurant or a lounge.

As far as Allyn was considered, that incident at Pit Stop was in no way the most unusual to take place there. In fact, after a number of other abnormal occurrences took place, not much surprised him. An episode took place one afternoon when Gordon pulled him aside and said, "There will be a woman named Marla stopping by

tomorrow, and she will be asking for you. I want you to give her this envelope." Sure enough, a woman walked in the following morning and asked to see Bob Allyn. She was a show-stopper. On a scale of one to ten, she was a "ten." Allyn handed her the envelope, which obviously contained a good amount of cash. She smiled, said "Thank you," and left as quickly as she had appeared. Allyn knew she had been the date the night before for one of Gordon's business associates who had come to Tampa from Miami. As bizarre as it was, Allyn realized that Gordon trusted him enough to handle a discreet transaction.

Gordon was a giving man, not only with his money, but also with his knowledge. His weekly column in La Gaceta was a vehicle for him to keep people abreast of local, as well as national sporting events. Occasionally, he would throw in a human interest story. He let his readers know when a movie crew was working on location in the Tampa Bay area. Danny Fleenor of the Hurricane Hell Drivers was one of the principal stunt

doubles in the racing scenes for a 1972 movie called The Daredevil starring veteran actors George Montgomery and Terry Moore. It was an opportunity for director, Ken Murray, to get his feet wet in Florida movie-making by shooting a low-budget film. For the second time, Gordon acted as technical director, and even made cameo appearances in the movie.

When the racing scenes were complete, the cast of The Daredevil met for a party at the home of retired actor John Carroll. It was a typical, cast party bash with all the trimmings in a very nice home on Bayway Isles in St. Petersburg. The liquor sat on tables in 2½-foot tall bottles with tops that looked like giant mustard or ketchup dispensers that people push down with the palm of their hands. Entertainer Lenny Dee played the organ, while Carroll more than adequately sang a portion of an opera. Gordon made a joke about the goings-on as the evening progressed and the guests got more and more drunk: "My father-in-law, Pops, was having a great time with Blue Moore (Terry

Moore's mother); my son-in-law, Allyn, was sitting on a couch talking to actress Terry Moore; my wife, Smoke, and daughter, Pam, were in the back yard walking around with my good friend, Bob Vallee; and I was standing there by myself, leaning against the wall playing pocket pool."

Gordon mentioned more news of the silver screen: "Getting back to the movie business, I understand that the movie 'Jump' has been recalled by the Cannon Group, and is in the process of re-editing and a change of title is expected. Let's hope so, it needed a lot of work when it played here. I understand the uncut version was really good and would have made a fine movie." The movie, based on Richard Wheelwright's script, was re-released later under the name Fury on Wheels, and included credits for actors Judd Hirsch, Paul Sorvino, and Tom Ligon.

As the host for CWF, Gordon called the action for clashes over the prestigious Florida and Southern heavyweight titles. Jack Brisco, perhaps

the most popular wrestler to ever hold the Florida title, lost it to Paul Jones on May 16, 1972. On CWF one day, Jones said he was going to throw the title belt off Gandy Bridge into Tampa Bay. Jones said it was one of the craziest scenes of his career when he and a friend headed west out of Tampa onto the Gandy Bridge. The bridge was lined on both sides with wrestling fans, TV camera crews, and squad cars. Originally, Jones didn't know if he'd actually throw the belt or not, but when he saw the crowd on hand, he really didn't have much of a choice. While his friend waited behind the wheel, Jones got out and tossed the belt over the bridge guard rails and into the waters of Tampa Bay. In order to avoid arrest by the police, who were moving his way, Jones hopped back into the car and his friend continued driving west on the bridge toward St. Petersburg. The incident has been the talk of wrestling fans in Florida ever since.

As important as that event was to professional wrestling in Florida, another event took place in

Gordon's life on November 15, 1972, when his birth father, 70-year-old Frank Labiak, died. During the excitement and success of pro wrestling in Florida, no one, including Gordon, attached any importance to his passing.

Also at this time, the stationery for correspondence emitting from the Sportatorium was changed. "Deep South Sports," which had adorned the top of the letterhead for years, had been replaced by "L&G Promotions," representing Cowboy Luttrall and Eddie Graham. The information about the Southern Wrestling Alliance was replaced by the logo of the National Wrestling Alliance, and below that was a list of officers: Sam Muchnick, NWA president, and directors C.P. Luttrall (Tampa), Paul Jones (Atlanta), James Crockett (Charlotte), Frank Tunney (Toronto), and Roy Shire (San Francisco).

Although Gordon continued to see success in his role as the voice of professional wrestling, the same couldn't be said for his involvement in other

endeavors, specifically Pit Stop. The company had run into some major problems. Jim Oxley, the head mechanic, described it as follows: "I went outside the station for a moment, and when I came back, there were chains on the door. I begged and pleaded with the guys who locked the doors to let me back in for a moment just so I could get my glasses. When that didn't work, I made phone calls until I tracked down Gordon. When he arrived, he found out that the building was sealed up because of past due taxes. Evidently, one of Gordon's partners and a bookkeeper had pocketed the tax money without Gordon's knowledge. Gordon ran his butt off all over town, borrowing money from any establishment he could. He paid the taxes and the place was re-opened, but it didn't stay in business for long after that."

Gordon also discontinued his relationship with Golden Gate Speedway and Frank Dery. Due to smaller crowds and his battles with the Environmental Protection Agency, it was no longer profitable for Frank Dery to run year-round. The

gates remained close from September until the late model championships ran in November.

Gordon was supposed to have 20 percent ownership in the track since the day they opened, and Frank always avoided the subject. When Gordon continued to press the issue, Frank motioned for Gordon to follow him. Dery went out to the side of the oval, picked up a piece of loose asphalt, and held it out to Gordon, while saying, "Here's your piece of the track." Gordon was livid. Dery proceeded to offer Gordon a check, on the spot, for $6,000 to buy him out.

Considering how much the track had increased in value, particularly the land it sat on, Dery's offer was an insult to Gordon. He later filed suit and demanded an accounting from Dery. Frank had all the records, though, and the courts backed him and denied Gordon's suit. Gordon got a meager payoff and went on his way. Dery was rid of Solie, but without Gordon's public relations and announcing skills, Golden Gate Speedway just wasn't the

same.

"People respected Frank Dery," said Buzzie Reutimann, "but he could be hard to get along with at times. Gordon, on the other hand, had the ability to get along with almost everyone. He negotiated well with people. If I had a bad night at the track, or a wreck, Gordon would call me during the week to make sure everything was okay, and to see if I was going to race at the next event. He looked after his top drivers. I always thought that Gordon did most of the managing at the track, especially since Frank had a commercial flower business to run."

Buzzie went on, "Gordon was also one of the best in the business when it came to announcing a race. He got the crowds so excited about the action on the track because he could call a wheel coming off a car before it ever happened. And Gordon liked to have fun while entertaining the fans. Sometimes, as drivers, we forget that we are entertainers. We like the competition and take it seriously when there's points and money on the

line, but we're still entertainers. Gordon knew how to get the crowd involved and let us have some fun in between the point races.

"One night, Will Cagle caused me to spin out, and that was all Gordon needed to rile up the crowd. While we were trying to set up for a restart, Gordon was playing up the spin out and talking to the fans: 'I'm sure there's going to be some bad blood now between Cagle and Reutimann. It wouldn't surprise me if it takes a special grudge race to settle the differences that now exist between these two feuding drivers.' After the races that night, Frank Dery approached Cagle and I and offered us each fifty bucks to run a five-lap grudge race the next weekend. Will and I dragged it out for two or three weeks … one time I'd spin out, and another week, he'd spin out. It was a lot of fun in-between our point races, the fans loved it, and the whole thing was started by Gordon. He loved the competition and did everything he could to bring fans out to watch us drive. On another occasion, Gordon had a

newspaper reporter ride in my car during a heat race. I installed a second seat so the guy could ride along. It was great public relations and the type of thing that Gordon did consistently. Gordon was one of the last good promoters of auto racing in Florida. He was the main reason that Golden Gate Speedway was a hot spot of racing for many years.

"There's another reason that Gordon holds a special place in the hearts of people who were around Golden Gate Speedway," claimed Buzzie. "We didn't have the Devil Rays or other pro sports teams in those days. On the weekends, we went to the racetrack. It was our life. We even knew people who met there and got married. It was a great environment to grow up around, and Gordon was right in the middle of the whole thing."

Buzzie is proud of the fact that his family now includes a third-generation driver. His dad, Emil, began the family's racing tradition, and now Buzzie's son, David, is seen on nationally televised racing events. David put himself on the

pole at Homestead near the end of the 2008 racing season, and scored his second-career NASCAR Sprint Cup Series pole on April 3, 2009, for the Samsung 500 at the Texas Motor Speedway. In six NASCAR Nationwide Series starts at Texas Motor Speedway, he has two top-10 finishes and one pole to his credit, with a total of 22 laps led. He has qualified inside the top-15 four times and has finished outside the top-20 only once. He drives the No. 00 Aaron's Dream Machine Toyota Camry for Michael Waltrip Racing.

Chapter 7: NWA (No Women Allowed)

Gene Anderson, Gordon, and Ole Anderson on the set of *Georgia Championship Wrestling* (1974)

Amid the busy schedule and long trips in the Florida territory, the wrestlers still had time for a little fun, and no one appreciated a good rib more

than Gordon. On March 1, 1973, he received a script from the Tampa wrestling office. It was a make believe "spoof" of a commercial involving the well-known supplement, "Geritol."

Gordon was to appear with a Geritol sign in the background and read the words, "Today's program is being brought to you by Geritol, the high-potency iron tonic for low-potency people." He then was supposed to hold up a bottle of Geritol and say, "Fellow senior citizens. Do you find it hard getting up in the morning? If not, perhaps what you need is Geritol, the amazing formula that keeps lead in the old pencil for years longer than nature ever intended. No need to have the old prostate massaged every time nothing comes up." (Gordon points to label) "A good healthy swig of Geritol will get the job done just as well, and it's a lot easier to take if you happen to be a little goosey."

Gordon was scripted to put down the bottle and state, "Later on in today's program, I'll be telling you all about how Geritol helped me to overcome

a prematurely impotent condition, brought on by years of continual dissipation, and how only a case a week keeps me capable of an occasional fling. But right now, I see our first match is ready, so let's turn it over to our ring announcer, Mike Moore."

Mike Moore's lines read, "Thank you, Gordon. Ladies and gentleman, isn't it amazing what Geritol can do for the elderly and impotent? Gordon Solie is a living example of how modern medical science can preserve the human body through the use of potency supplements like Geritol. And now, in the far corner…"

The only health problem Gordon really had at the time came from an injury. While participating in a donkey baseball game for charity, Gordon went flying off his ride and broke his left tibia. TV viewers questioned why Gordon was sitting crooked, almost sideways, during subsequent telecasts, and were informed that he was doing so because of his cast.

Cast or not, Gordon was making the most out of a new opportunity. In Atlanta, a war between two wrestling companies had begun. Ray Gunkel, the owner and promoter of wrestling in Georgia, died on August 1, 1972 after a match with Ox Baker in Savannah, Georgia. After Ray's funeral, Gunkel's partners made some changes to the operations and tried to edge Ray's widow, Ann Gunkel, out of the company. Ann decided to step out on her own and formed the All South Wrestling Alliance [ASWA], taking all but two of the wrestlers that worked for the NWA. She took their announcer, Ed Capral, as well. That began a bitter promotional war between the two factions.

Gordon became involved when Paul Jones, part-owner and figurehead promoter of the NWA promotion, called Eddie Graham and said he needed help. He needed an announcer for their TV show. Eddie immediately sent Gordon to Atlanta, along with several wrestlers. On December 30, 1972, Gordon made his first appearance on Georgia Championship Wrestling, replacing

Sterling Brewer, who hosted the first show on November 25. Gordon quickly became quite comfortable handling the broadcasts for two weekly television programs. His early tenure with Georgia Championship Wrestling was spent co-hosting with wrestler/announcer, Les Thatcher. Les said that Gordon never missed a beat, despite whatever might happen on the set. "We used to sit on these adjustable chairs that were inflatable," said Thatcher. "One day, we were doing the show, and Gordon's chair started to leak air, and he was literally sinking and getting lower and lower. With his head just about to disappear below the announcers' table, Gordon calmly said, 'That's how I see it from my viewpoint; Back to you, Les.'"

Besides the house shows at Tampa's Armory, Gordon also made some trips to the live Friday night shows held at the Atlanta Omni. He was there when GCW held their inaugural wrestling matches at the Omni on May 18, 1973, in front of a sold-out house. Wrestler Jack Brisco said tempers flared

and the crowd almost got out of control in the parking lots when so many people were turned away. In addition to local law enforcement, State police had to be called to squash disturbances outside the Omni. Inside the arena, Bobby Shane, Bob Armstrong, and Bobby Duncum competed in a round-robin tournament to see who would win a 1973 Cadillac, and Dandy Jack took on Norvell Austin in a "Lumberjack Match."

The 16-page "Ringsider" program for the Omni event devoted one page to Gordon and stated, "Solie began his professional career in 1950 with Cowboy Luttrall. In 1961, he began commentary for the weekly wrestling TV show in Tampa on one station. The program is now nationally syndicated and is seen in over 25 markets in the United States, the Bahamas, Puerto Rico, occasionally in Japan and Australia. Championship Wrestling from Florida has been rated number one by the National Wrestling Alliance for the past five years."

A week later, the house was packed again for the "Omni II," when Bob Armstrong faced Shane in a "Cadillac versus $8,599 cash" match.

Armstrong has many memories of those early days of the Georgia territory, including a few of Gordon. "I was known for quick reversals at the time," said Bob. "I would escape a hold, and before my opponent knew what happened, I'd be behind him. Because of my quickness, Gordon came up with a nickname and labeled me 'Bullet' Bob Armstrong. The new nickname stuck, too. During interviews, I knew that Gordon would lead me through any tough spots if I drew a blank or lost my place. He was a good friend to me and the best wrestling announcer ever."

As the official host for GCW, Gordon filmed every Saturday morning for the weekly show which aired on Saturday evenings on Atlanta's WTCG-Channel 17. If needed, Gordon also flew to Atlanta on Tuesdays to film special segments and interviews for the program. Back in Tampa, he

filmed once a week at the Sportatorium for Championship Wrestling from Florida.

When he wasn't at the microphone, Gordon continued to serve the communities in Florida whenever possible, and continued the ideals originated by Cowboy Luttrall. Orange County sent a letter thanking Gordon for his part in bringing wrestlers Eddie Graham, Hiro Matsuda, and Tony Charles to visit the children in Youth Hall.

In addition to being highly sought after by charities, Gordon fielded regular requests from reporters and really became the spokesperson for pro wrestling. In an interview with Marty Perlmutter, Gordon again claimed that professional wrestlers were the best-conditioned athletes in the world. In fact, he said that the grapplers took more punishment than pro football players. It was Gordon's contention that wrestlers could compete for an hour without a time out, and by comparison, football players only averaged 14 minutes of contact per game in-between several breaks in the

action. The football players also wore protective gear, while the wrestlers wore only boots and a pair of trunks (“Solie tuned”).

By 1973, CWF had 213,000 viewers on Channel 44 (UHF station) and another 90,000 viewers when the show aired on Channel 10 (ABC affiliate). The ARB statistics showed that CWF was topping both NFC Football and Monday Night Football in the Tampa market. Jim Selman of the Tampa Tribune noted, "So, don’t you turn off Gary Hart and his Army the next time you see them. An awful lot of people are tuned in … and watching" (C1).

Another venue for the Florida grapplers was Robarts Sports Arena in Sarasota. On March 9, Gordon was the "Guest Ring Announcer" for a card at Robarts presented by his friend, Coach John Heath. Coach Heath was the subject of a short bio written by Gordon:

John Heath is a man who has distinguished

himself in both amateur and professional wrestling. He excelled at the amateur sport while attending Penn State Teacher's College, where he made it to the quarter finals of the Olympics as a free-style competitor in the 177-pound division.

John is currently Athletic Director and Coach at Cardinal Mooney High School in Sarasota, Florida, where he has coached two consecutive, undefeated football teams and one undefeated wrestling team. John is also Athletic Director at St. Martha's High School in Sarasota, where he led the team to four state championships.

A fifth Florida AAU title came when John coached the "Cowboy" Luttrall wrestling school to victory in 1963. In all, John Heath has produced 41 gold medal winners in nine years as an amateur coach. As a professional, Heath sets an outstanding example for the young men he trains in the amateurs. He is fast, aggressive, and has a virtually unlimited repertoire of holds. Although he tips the

scales at just less than 220 pounds, he is capable of holding his own against the biggest men in the sport.

Few men in professional wrestling today are better examples of what a good amateur background can do for a professional athlete. A gentleman in and out of the ring, Sarasota's John Heath is a credit to his sport.

When Luttrall first began funding the amateur wrestlers, he made it possible for them to travel with the pros, and they put on demonstrations at different venues in Florida. They really didn't have any teams to compete against, so Luttrall let them perform exhibitions during some of the professional events. John Heath was the man to whom Luttrall turned to help get amateur wrestling off the ground in Florida. Gordon was one-hundred percent behind the idea of maintaining a good relationship between the amateur and professional ranks in wrestling, and Luttrall gave him permission to inform audiences about amateur wrestling news. No other pro wrestling company

did as much to advance the sport of amateur wrestling as did L&G Promotions.

Their support of amateur wrestling generated a few complaints from viewers directed at Gordon and CWF. Gordon would occasionally interview amateur coaches and athletes, but viewers thought the amateur stuff was boring when compared to the professional side of the show.

Normally, feedback from fans contained high praise for Gordon and the grapplers, but occasionally, a fan would write in to vent his or her discontent. In 1974, one such fan wrote a letter to Atlanta promoter, Paul Jones, complaining that the actual wrestling portion of the show had dwindled to only a few minutes. The fan copied the letter to Gordon and Freddie Miller, director of Georgia Championship Wrestling. Besides chastising Miller for the shortage of wrestling, the fan had a few choice comments about Gordon:

"Another aspect of the farce called 'Georgia

Championship Wrestling' that is rankling, is that mop head announcer, Gordon Solie. During the final few minutes of the 'Georgia Championship Wrestling' hour on March 16, 1974, a brief brawl broke out between a hooded clown alluded to as Mr. Wrestling No. 2 and Art Nelson. Gordon Solie immediately developed one of his periodic spells of hysteria and began yelling that 'something had to be done,' 'we can't allow such a display to be seen by our television viewers,' 'someone must come in and stop this,' 'we will be back in a few minutes,' at which point the television viewers were given another dose of despicable commercials.

"Such patently absurd, adolescent ranting by Mr. Solie is indefensible. If Mr. Solie doesn't expect to see brawling and altercations at wrestling matches, pray tell me what does he expect to view? The cutting away remarks, and we will be right back, was really infuriating. Two clowns are mauling each

other in a wrestling ring and that hysterical lout Gordon Solie ‘protects’ his viewers by cutting away for more stupefied commercials. Personally I would suggest that since Gordon Solie apparently expects to see nothing more violent than a parade of hirsute St. Bernards, and hooded buffoons masquerading as wrestlers, polluting the air with their braggadocio and threats to their adversaries of the moment, it would be prudent for him to seek a more serene vocation. Perhaps announcing friendly bingo games between groups of little old ladies would be apropos.”

Criticism definitely got a reaction from Gordon. He was a perfectionist in his trade, and negative feedback always upset him. If Gordon felt he had a leg to stand on, he would immediately respond with a letter, a phone call, or an editorial. Mistakes bothered him, as well. "If you’re going to do something, for God’s sake, do it right" was a statement Gordon made on several occasions. If an error appeared in an article about racing or

wrestling, Gordon sent a letter to the author or publisher informing them of the inaccuracy.

The heat Gordon got was nothing compared to the pressure put on Ann Gunkel, the "opposition" wrestling promoter in Georgia. In her opinion, she was looked down upon by the NWA simply because she was a woman. She told reporter Al Thomy, "A lot of people were against me. They said it was too tough for a woman. And now they're saying I'm too tough for the sport. I told them that NWA stood for 'no women allowed'" (1G). Ann made a strong showing with her All South Wrestling Alliance promotion, but her company would be out of business by the end of 1974. The competition from Georgia Championship Wrestling was just too strong.

Gordon was involved in his own competition, and in May 1974, word began to seep out that he and WYOU Radio would be awarded first prize in the Florida Bar 19th Annual Media Awards competition. The award recognized his comments

in the editorial category, and specifically, his words chastising the state legislature for failing to pass the Equal Rights Amendment. An award luncheon was held at Disney World in Orlando to honor Gordon and the winners in other categories. Congratulations came to Gordon from many sources, including a letter from Sam M. Gibbons, United States Congressman. It was the second time that Gordon had won first place in radio editorials from the Florida Bar Association.

The weekend of June 27-30, 1974, found Paul Jones and Mid-South Sports acting as the host promotion for the Wrestling Fans International Association (WFIA) convention. Les Thatcher was the master of ceremonies, Danny Goddard was chairman, and photographer Gene Gordon was the co-chairman for the three-day event. The microphone duties for the convention were shared by Les Thatcher, promoter Paul Jones, and Gordon Solie.

A few days later, on July 3, 1974, Gordon was

off to Charlotte, North Carolina, to meet with John Ringley, who was involved with the Crockett wrestling promotion. Gordon appeared on the Mid-Atlantic Championship Wrestling TV show in Charlotte. Correspondence between Gordon and Ringley indicate that his standard fee for guest appearances was $150. An interesting note in one of the letters was that airfare at the time from Tampa to Charlotte was $171.26.

Karen DeYoung wrote about the phenomenon of Gordon Solie and the industry in an article for the St. Petersburg Times called, “The ‘whys’ of wrestling pinned down." She described the television host broadcasting from the Sunshine State:

> Wrestlers come and go, but Solie, kind of a Dick Clark of the Suncoast ringside who looks exactly the same as ten years ago, except for a little less hair above the ears and a little more below, is a fixture. Each Thursday on a mini-soundstage next to the

> ring at the Tampa Sportatorium, he tapes interviews with 200-plus pound bruisers with names like ‘The Korean Assassin’ and ‘Killer Brooks,’ who, by insulting each other’s mothers and promising to tear each other to pieces in a fervent grudge match, entice fans to plunk down their dollars at the Armory. (1D)

For Gordon, the industry revolved around the soap opera of good versus evil, showmanship, and loyalty to favorite wrestlers like Dusty Rhodes, the "American Dream," that kept packing in the fans. By 1974, Rhodes was no longer a "bad guy," having turned on his tag team partner and manager, Pak Song and Gary Hart, respectively. He was the new "good guy" in wrestling, and as Mike Graham told reporter Karen DeYoung when questioned about Rhodes and the credibility of the matches, "Sure, in a way we hold back. A lot of people pay to see Dusty Rhodes wrestle, and if I broke his leg in the ring, if I put him out of commission, that would be money out of my own pocket" (1D).

Mike got his start in wrestling in 1972 under the tutelage of the Great Malenko and Hiro Matsuda. He was billed as a "good guy" and often crossed paths with Gordon. In describing the CWF host, Mike said, "Gordon was a good guy. He was always smiling, always upbeat, and if the guys came in a bit low, he cheered them up. Before interviews, he spoke with me and let me know what points he thought I should make about a particular opponent or an upcoming title match. That way, I was prepared to say something relevant about the business. If any of us stumbled or got stuck in an interview, then Gordon would ask us specific questions to keep us on track. He was great with the new guys, especially if they were nervous before interviews. One time, he sat at the announcers table wearing his suit coat, shirt, tie, underwear, shoes, and socks, but no pants. When the new guy came out for the interview and saw Gordon sitting there in his boxers, he laughed so hard that he was relaxed for the interview. The only problem was trying to get the guy to stop laughing so Gordon could actually conduct the

interview. And he was gracious about signing autographs after the matches and even at airports. I just didn't hear people say anything bad about Gordon."

More coverage on CWF appeared in the media when Greg Larson wrote an article in "Television," the (Jacksonville) Florida Times-Union weekly television guide, about wrestling matches filmed at Tampa's Sportatorium. "I used to refer to it as the 'beautiful Sportatorium,'" Gordon told Larson, "but too many people were asking what was so beautiful about it (6,7). There was, in fact, nothing beautiful about it." When the lights were down, and they were dimmed on purpose, no one watching on television had a clue just how dumpy the building was inside. To TV viewers, an excited crowd of 100 spectators sounded like a crowd of 3,000. Larson pointed out that CWF, the highest-rated television show in Tampa and a highly rated show in Jacksonville, was created in a building with no air conditioning and no locker rooms. Regardless, the show had

spread to 26 markets, which included Philadelphia and New York. In addition to the markets for CWF, Gordon Solie was a regular visitor to living rooms across 29 states on GCW. He also traveled to Dothan, Alabama, for Southeastern Championship Wrestling. "Somehow or other, I'm on in all fifty states," relayed Gordon to Larson. "It's a lot of traveling, but who's complaining?"

"Bullet" Bob Armstrong said, "Whether it was the televised matches in Tampa, Atlanta, Dothan, or Knoxville, we all wanted Gordon to do the announcing."

Georgia Championship Wrestling was taped on Saturday mornings from ten o'clock until noon. After taking care of post-production business, Gordon would leave the studio around one o'clock and rush to the airport. He would fly to Dothan, Alabama, to host Southeastern Championship Wrestling at the WTVY-TV studios at 5:30 p.m. There were many times when he would arrive on the set while the opening theme music was playing,

with no idea about who was going to wrestle or what storylines the promotion wanted to push.

Televised pro wrestling emitting from the southeastern United States had grown by leaps and bounds, and the common denominator was the host, Gordon Solie.

In 1974, wrestlers and actors combined to give the "squared circle" even more publicity with the release of a movie titled The Wrestler. Veteran actors Ed Asner and Elaine Giftos highlighted the cast, with supporting roles by wrestlers Verne Gagne, Billy Robinson, Don Muraco, Dick "The Bruiser" Afflis, Joe Scarpello, Danny Hodge, Lord "Tally-Ho" Blears, Vince McMahon [Vincent J. McMahon], Danny Hodge, and several others. A sneak preview was set up for the film in Tampa, Florida. Many of wrestling's prominent names were on hand, including National Wrestling Alliance president Sam Muchnick, Eddie Graham, Don Curtis, CWF photographer and publicity man Jerry Prater, and the voice of wrestling, Gordon

Solie. Scott Teal, who wrote about the premiere in the October 1974 issue of Wrestling Book magazine, applauded the grapplers for using the movie preview as a fund raiser for the Boys Club of Tampa (30-34).

WWE Hall of Fame inductee, Rocky Johnson, reminisced about working with Gordon in both the Georgia and Florida territories. "It was difficult at times in interviews," said Rocky, "because I was appearing on two different shows, Championship Wrestling from Florida and Georgia Championship Wrestling, and I didn't want to get confused and make a mistake. Gordon told me to relax and said, 'That's why Mr. Gordon's here.' He used to refer to himself as 'Mr. Gordon.' He never left us standing there stuck in an interview. If we missed something, he'd pick it up. Sometimes, guys would try to intimidate Gordon during an interview, but he would instinctively put them in their place. That's why we called him 'Mr. Natural.'"

Rocky continued, "Gordon and the guys loved to

pull pranks on each other, and he was on the receiving end of some good ones. When Gordon did the interviews for the televised shows, he used to stand on a mat for long periods of time. His feet got sore, so he'd pull his shoes off and stand there in his socks. The guys put super glue on his mat occasionally, and even dumped some itching powder there. I remember Gordon quickly moving his feet around on the mat because they were itching. We all knew what was going on, but the studio audience didn't have a clue. Another time, someone tied Gordon's bumper to a big tiller. When Gordon pulled out of the parking lot, he left his rear bumper on the ground."

Greg Solie remembered one incident where the tables were turned, and it was Gordon who was pulling the prank: "Oftentimes, we would pretend to film an interview with one of the wrestlers, and Gordon would ask the most hilarious questions. Everyone would be in on the gag except the wrestler. One time, there was a wrestler who would just sit in the background of the interview

set while his manager did the talking. The wrestler's character was supposed to be rather dim-witted, and he would sit eating bananas. After the first take (which was good), Gordon pretended to have a problem with the way it came out. We proceeded to do three or four 'dummy' takes, while the wrestler had to keep eating bananas. After about ten or twelve bananas, Gordon let him in on the joke. He was feeling quite green by then. We all had a good laugh."

In 1975, a new issue arose for Gordon and those associated with TV wrestling when the FCC clamped down on television stations and held them responsible for clearly separating program and commercial content. No longer could wrestling promotions devote the major part of a 60-minute program to advertising future shows and live events with dates and times. In a letter dated April 18, 1975, Jim Barnett was notified by Lemuel E. Schofield of Russ Craft Broadcasting of Tennessee, Inc. that the FCC sent a "Notice of Apparent Liability" to KCOP Television in regard

to a show called KCOP Championship Wrestling. Schofield had previously expressed concerns to Barnett in January 1975 when it was agreed that Georgia Championship Wrestling would be carried on an affiliate station, WRCB-TV. In order to avoid a letter like the one KCOP received, Schofield asked Barnett to sign an agreement to the following terms:

1) The commercial content of each telecast had to be clearly separated from the program content.
2) No commercials, promotions, "plugs," or other mentions could be made during any telecast except during the first and third "interview" segments of the GCW program.
3) The second interview on the program could not mention any upcoming matches.
4) WRCB-TV had the right to edit any GCW program to guarantee compliance with the rules.
5) During every program, there had to be a distinct audio and video announcement as

follows: "The announcer on this program is chosen and paid by parties other than the licensee of this station, namely, Georgia Championship Wrestling."

It was particularly important to follow the rules because it was obvious that television was making or breaking wrestling promotions. Robert Hatch, president of Pro Wrestling International, released a statement that IWA (International Wrestling Association) was soaring in the television ratings. Hatch wrote that IWA had over one million viewers through WOR-TV in the Northeast, and that was five times the number that promoter McMahon had. He felt that IWA had taken over as the number-one-rated television show in the United States and had 16 dates booked in May for house shows from Miami up to Washington, and west to Cleveland.

IWA was waiting for television licenses in various states, and Hatch confidently wrote: "In three months, the IWA has certainly shaken up the

old, established NWA promoters who have operated their monopoly for many years."

That confidence dwindled as the TV syndication did not pan out as planned. Five or six months later, the primary investor, Eddie Einhorn, tired of losing money and pulled the plug on the IWA. Even with the televised matches coming to an end, some of the individual promoters continued to promote live shows using the IWA name.

About the same time, Gordon heard that station KCOP, which was the one that had received the FCC letter of apparent liability, had been slapped with a $2,000 fine. He was happy that he had been conforming to the new FCC guidelines and later received a thank you letter from WSWB-TV Channel 35 in Orlando for his co-operation and adherence. In the interim, Barnett and Eddie Graham met with Herbert Gold of WJKS-TV Channel 17 in Jacksonville, and closed a deal to air GCW at a cost of $200 per show. They also had to sign an agreement with Channel 17 for the

commercial and content division on the show. Every network or station deal was a bonus for GCW, and it continued to spread its signal across the U.S.

Although pro wrestling was a hot commodity, not every station manager jumped on the band wagon. Gordon received "refrigerator letters" from certain establishments in regards to a promotion for wrestling. Those letters contained responses that echoed, "We can’t do it now, but we’ll keep you in mind." In other words, don’t hold your breath. There were many organizations, however, that bombarded Gordon with requests for special appearances by himself or wrestlers. Town and Country Baseball wanted a wrestler present for opening day ceremonies. Gordon sent grapplers to Kenly Elementary School for an exhibition on the playground. Big Brothers of Polk County wanted to hold a benefit wrestling card on a regular basis for fund raising. The Police Department in New Port Richey asked to do a benefit to raise money for the Lions Club. The Florida Sheriffs Girls Villa in

Bartow inquired about a benefit wrestling card. The Bradford House restaurant wanted to have a "Meet Your Favorite Wrestler" day. The Pinellas House for the HRS Division of Youth Services hoped to get wrestlers to visit the halfway house in St. Petersburg. The Civitan Club of Stuart asked for a wrestling benefit to help construct a new track facility at Martin County High School. A center for the Division of Retardation in Orlando asked for fan literature, photos, or anything Gordon could send. Many of the teenagers who lived at the center were loyal followers of CWF, and one, in particular, was a big fan of Dusty Rhodes and "Cowboy" Bill Watts. The flow of letters and phone calls were never-ending, and Gordon obliged whenever he could.

The demand was high and the development of televised wrestling under the auspice of the National Wrestling Alliance was terrific. Gordon loved it all. The competition, however, definitely did not share Gordon's love of the NWA. Jimmy Murdock, who had promoted wrestling in

Jacksonville in the ‘50s and early ‘60s, scheduled an IWA wrestling card in Jacksonville, only to find out that Don Curtis had scheduled an NWA-sanctioned wrestling event on the same evening. Murdock complained to Andy Cohen of the Florida Times-Union: “Curtis is afraid my type of wrestling will catch on. So of all the nights of the week, he planned his matches the same time as mine. He wants to put me out of business, that’s all, and he’s been doing it all over the state" (13A).

Don Curtis insisted it was just a coincidence, and he told Cohen, "He just has a Mickey Mouse operation. Poor Jim doesn’t know the people he’s dealing with." Jimmy, a veteran of the business for a couple of decades, wasn’t the only independent promoter to resent the presence of the NWA. At the time, the NWA had the big TV deals, the fan base, and the talent. They could sit back and watch challenging promotions just fade away.

Chapter 8: You Say Suplex, I Say Suplay

Gordon and Andre the Giant

On January 11, 1976, Ray Holliman of the St. Petersburg Times interviewed Jim Tomlin of Tampa's WTOG-TV Channel 44. Tomlin said the November Nielson ratings indicated that only four shows outperformed Tampa's wrestling, and they were the Mary Tyler Moore Show, the Bob Newhart Show, Kojak, and NFL football games. Only 12,000 viewers separated the Mary Tyler Moore Show and CWF in the 18-49 male age groups. The football stats were understandable at the time because a lot of Tampa Bay area residents watched the Miami Dolphins battle two other teams for the division title. Even so, CWF topped the average audience for the World Series games, Monday Night Football, and NCAA football games.

Tomlin also pointed out to Holliman that wrestling's public image as strictly blue-collar was incorrect. "I was amazed. When you go to see wrestling at an arena, you see a lot of shirts and ties in the audience. And wrestling definitely has a very loyal audience." In a final comment, Tomlin

spoke about competitor WLCY-TV CH-10, the station that ran CWF on Sundays: "Note that Channel 10 is pre-empting the first hour of today's final round of the L'eggs World series of Women's Tennis to keep the wrestling show on" ("TV").

The media still liked to question the integrity of pro wrestling, as well, and in light of that, Herb Greenburg of the Boca Raton News asked Gordon how he answered when a fan asked if pro wrestling matches were faked. Gordon replied:

> If it's a kid, I ask him where he heard that. If he says his dad told him, I say, "Tell your dad to come down here and I'll let him work out with a wrestler." If it's an adult, I say "anytime you'd like to find out, if you think you're in fairly good shape, you can find out in the ring." (C1)

Gordon added that pro wrestlers were independent contractors and not bound by a reserve clause like players in baseball or football.

The wrestlers were free to perform for the NWA, the WWWF, or the AWA [American Wrestling Association]. It also was a possibility, according to Gordon, that all the wrestling groups could merge into one.

Always seeking to enhance the credibility of pro wrestling, Gordon contacted the operations director of the National Sportscasters and Sportswriters Awards. Gordon's pal, Milt Spencer, was first vice president of the NSSA and served with board members Keith Jackson, Chris Schenkel, and Curt Gowdy, to name a few. Gordon wanted to bring the world heavyweight wrestling champion to the weekend awards ceremonies and received a return letter stating that would be just fine.

Exposure was the key, and on June 11, 1976, Titan Productions, Inc. signed an agreement with both Georgia Championship Wrestling and Championship Wrestling from Florida. In exchange for 50% of the gross profits, Titan secured the

exclusive closed-circuit television rights to both shows and the right to market them internationally in non-competitive markets. It's important to note that "Titan Productions, Inc." is in no way affiliated with Vincent K. McMahon's "Titan Sports, Inc." Titan Productions was a movie production company whose first movie release was the 1981 fantasy Clash of the Titans. They later produced a series of low-budget films, the most well-known being Trail of the Pink Panther [1982] and Curse of the Pink Panther [1983].

To further promote CWF in the Sunshine State, Coach John Heath went on the road and set up venues for benefit wrestling cards. One was in his own backyard when he booked Manatee Junior College as the site for a Bayshore High School fund raiser. Heath, who was 53 at the time, came out of semi-retirement and wrestled Mike Pappas.

While Championship Wrestling from Florida was an extremely popular television show, its counterpart, Georgia Championship Wrestling,

was growing at an even faster pace. Bobby Simmons came over to GCW in 1974 after Ann Gunkel's promotion closed up. He worked in the business office and refereed the televised matches. "Unless you were there," said Bobby, "it would be hard to imagine how big the show was. By 1976, we were out-performing every other show on Turner's network, including the Atlanta Braves, and we were landing big corporate sponsors."

Bobby said that because of the importance of GCW, the show ran on an extremely tight schedule. That was fine, except for one thing. While Bobby was in the ring, he really had no way to keep track of time, and he had no idea of when to end the last match. He spoke with Gordon, who came up with a plan. Gordon had a clock that ran the time down backwards, so when it was time to wrap up the last match, Gordon signaled Bobby by adjusting his tie. As soon as Bobby saw Gordon grab his tie, Bobby moved in and told the wrestlers to finish the bout.

Gordon's new stage direction worked fine until

one particular show. Bobby was refereeing a match and had no idea that there was still seven or eight minutes left in the show. He looked over at the set and saw Gordon rubbing his throat, so he told the wrestlers to go home [end the match]. Bobby left the ring and was greeted by Tom Renesto, who chewed him out for ending the match so prematurely. As Bobby stood respectfully and listened, Gordon walked up with an explanation: "It's not Bobby's fault. I forgot to tell anyone that I had a sore throat."

The matches Bobby referred to were held on Techwood Drive in Atlanta, and like a lot of other TV productions, there was a live audience. From nine o'clock in the morning until noon, the studio audience was allowed to watch wrestling matches and interviews. After that, the fans were asked to leave so post-production work could be completed. A young man named Scooter Leslie decided to remain behind when the rest of the audience left and began to hang around afterwards each week. Although he was only 18 years old,

Scooter had done some radio broadcasting for a year and a half and he was captivated by Gordon's prowess with the microphone.

"It took three hours every Saturday morning," said Scooter, "for the production team to get what they needed for the two-hour Saturday night Georgia Championship Wrestling program. I began to stay after the morning sessions were over and Gordon picked up on the fact that I was a new broadcaster, and an enthusiastic one at that. I watched Gordon do some ringside interviews for the Sunday highlight show and then he offered to teach me some of the "ins and outs" of the trade. I sat and watched him as he prepared "scrub" matches, or "fillers," as they were called. Normally, they were matches that ran between four to six minutes and could be used to fill up a program. Gordon did the voiceovers for the matches, and as I got to know him, he'd let me do my own play-by-play for two minutes while viewing the matches, and then he'd critique me. He was always encouraging me and saying stuff like

‘You’ll get it kid.’ Gordon told me to ‘chain my words, one link to another,’ and to avoid saying words like ‘ahs,’ ‘ands,’ etc. As far as broadcasting a match, Gordon said ‘a little bit of silence’ was okay, too.

"On several occasions, Gordon even invited me to lunch. One time, Brian Blair was there. Another time, Paul Orndorff ate lunch with us. Regardless of where we were at, it was obvious that the wrestlers held Gordon in high esteem. When we went to lunch, we had to first walk through a long narrow corridor. That was okay until we’d see some guy like six-foot-four Terry Gordy, who weighed more than 300 pounds, coming toward us in the hallway, and you couldn’t just squeeze by. As soon as any of the wrestlers saw Gordon coming down that hallway, however, they found some method to get out of the way. It was out of sheer respect. Gordon never asked them to move, nor ever even motioned for any of the guys to clear a path. They just did it on their own and followed up with a pleasant, ‘How are you, Mr. Solie?’

After lunch, Gordon would always ask me, 'Are you going to be here next week, kid?' I always told him that I would do my best to be there, and he'd say 'okay' and give me that familiar Gordon Solie wink before he walked away."

As the pro wrestling industry continued to receive more attention in the mainstream media, some journalists got downright colorful. The National Observer published an article by Chicago's Paul Hendrickson, describing promoter Bob Luce's card at the International Amphitheater. Attendance was down a bit because many fans were saving their money for an upcoming closed-circuit event featuring two legends, boxer Muhammad Ali against Japanese wrestler Antonio Inoki. The tale by Hendrickson began like this:

> DON'T EVER call The Crusher by his real name, which happens to be Reggie Lisowski. Why, he might go berserk and start ripping the joint to pieces. You know who he's rasslin' tonight? That long-haired monkey from Texas,

> Bad Bobby Duncum. Duncum's been asking for it lately, and so for that matter has that ugly sidekick of his, Black Jack Lanza. The Crusher ain't scared of either of those two turkey-necks, coming in here with their boots and black gloves and them stupid cowboy hats. The Crusher's a clean living Polack from Milwaukee who don't truck with no drugs or bad women. Sure, he likes to go on a little toot sometimes, staying up all night drinking beer and doing the polka. But where's the harm in that? Ain't that better than being some kinda redneck degenerate, for crissakes? (14)

Many of the fans who didn't see the Crusher that night, June 26, 1976, were disappointed when they opted instead to spend their hard-earned money to watch the farce between Muhammad Ali and Antonio Inoki. Airing the match at the Omni in Atlanta on closed circuit television, Georgia Championship Wrestling billed the live show as "The War of the Worlds." Prior to the main event,

they featured live matches with wrestlers Mike Graham, Tony Charles, Jack Brisco, Dory Funk, Jr., Pak Song, Mark Lewin, Dick Slater, and Bill Watts. Gordon made the announcement to Omni fans that they were going to break away and join Vince McMahon, Jr. [Vincent K. McMahon] at Shea Stadium to see Chuck Wepner battle Andre the Giant, and after that, switch over to Japan to see Ali versus Inoki. It was not a highly rated boxer-versus-wrestler match, but the event itself was on the cutting edge of new communication technology for the professional wrestling business.

Another approach in covering the "squared circle" was written by Lydon Kuhns in a sequence of galleys which were featured in his St. Petersburg-based publication, Florida's West Coast. Gordon gave the credit to the dedicated fans that watched on TV, and in numerous interviews and conversations over the years, Gordon said that pro wrestling was a "healthy catharsis" (according to Dr. Karl Menninger) for the fans. They worked hard all week and came to the matches where they

could vent all their frustrations without hurting anyone. Gordon also mentioned "good versus evil." The former evil guy, Dusty Rhodes, was more popular than ever since his conversion to a "good guy." Kuhns, the founder and editor of Florida's West Coast, was impressed with Rhode's showmanship and wrote, "He once used a midget named the 'Haiti Kid' for a tag-team partner and then replaced him the next week with 7-foot-8-inch Andre the Giant" (Galley 1). Gordon referred to Dusty as "280 pounds of soul," and relayed to Kuhns, "Rather than a showman, Dusty is an athlete like Johnny Unitas, Bart Starr, or Joe Namath. He feels the people. He can anticipate (the spectators') moods and reactions. I've seen better athletes than Dusty, but they don't have the emotional appeal Dusty has." The fans at the matches eagerly waited for Dusty to finish off his opponents by raising his arm and smashing them on the head with his "bionic elbow."

Kuhn referred to the word "faked," and sought the opinion of wrestler Bob Orton, Sr. regarding

people who thought pro wrestling was faked. After an angry look engulfed his face, Orton barked that he'd smack them in the head if someone told him that wrestling was fake. As far as Orton was concerned, he worked his butt off every time he was in the ring, and as far as he knew, the other wrestlers did, too.

It was Gordon's contention that wrestling wasn't faked, but it might appear that way because the wrestlers were restricted by the rules. The rules didn't allow wrestlers to punch an opponent with a closed fist, so they used their forearms. The result was a forearm smash that to some people looked like a fake punch.

Although they were considered television stars and heroes by many, there seemed to be no escaping the skepticism, or the insults directed at the wrestlers, and they weren't limited to just their time at work. Pancho Alvarez was sitting in his office at a Tampa Pontiac automobile dealership when he overhead Eddie Graham talking to a

female cashier. When the cashier asked Eddie whether or not pro wrestling was faked, Eddie responded with, "Look at my forehead. Look at my ears. Does that look fake?" Anyone who knew Eddie had seen his forehead. He most definitely looked the part of a wrestler. Sections of Eddie's forehead almost looked like cellophane, and probably would bleed if you flicked it with your finger. After Eddie left, Pancho came out of his office and reprimanded the cashier: "That man is a professional wrestler. We are a professional dealership. The money that man paid for a vehicle helps to pay your salary." The longer Pancho spoke, the angrier he became over the fact that the cashier had been so rude to a customer. "Eddie came in over the years and bought cars from us … his son, Mike, too. I ripped the cashier a new asshole."

"I was associated with stock car racing and the automobile industry in general," said Pancho, "but I respected the athleticism and skill of the professional wrestlers. I never really had a

problem with any of them. There was, however, an occasional 'Solie' moment. There used to be a drugstore we went to that doubled as a breakfast/lunch restaurant. I was sitting there with Jim Harrell, owner of the car dealership, Dan Murphy, from the First National Bank, and another executive. It was a serious business meeting about expanding the business. One of the guys said, 'Hey, isn't that your buddy, Gordon?' I turned, and it was Gordon, so I acknowledged him. He walked over to me and said, 'What the hell are you doing with a crowd like this?' After a very brief chat, Gordon went back to his table, and I thought the clowning around was over. When Gordon got up to leave, everyone noticed, and then Gordon turned and looked directly at me. Without saying a word, he mouthed the words 'I love you.' Then he blew me a kiss and left. The guys at the table wanted to know what the heck was wrong with Gordon. I told them that he liked to joke around. I told Gordon later that I wanted to get up at the time and kick his ass."

"But Gordon," added Pancho, "was a great stock announcer, a great wrestling announcer … no, let me put it this way. Gordon was one of the greatest sports announcers I've ever known. The music could be playing at the racetrack, and on top of that, there was engine noise, but when Gordon spoke, he could mesmerize the crowd."

Gordon's voice was no longer heard at Golden Gate Speedway, but his schedule didn't get any easier after he quit his job at the race track. His weekly time commitment for wrestling was 65 to 70 hours a week, and more when necessary. After taping the CWF show on December 29, 1976, he took a flight to Fort Pierce to make a guest appearance at John Carroll High School for a fund raiser set up by Coach Heath. Joe DeSalvo, of the Fort Pierce News-Tribune, said Gordon's entrance alone captured the attention of every fan in the building, and they listened intently as he introduced the Southern heavyweight champion, Steve Keirn, and the challenger, Bob Orton, Jr. After the match, Gordon stayed and signed autographs for every

fan, young and old, who requested one. He flew back to Tampa that night.

The next day, Gordon appeared in Atlanta for an evening film session for a 90-minute HBO production. The following morning, he did two hours of studio work for the GCW program, and then flew back to Ocala, Florida for yet another wrestling event. On Sunday, he was able to retreat to his lake house and spend the day relaxing.

Gordon still had an interest in politics, too, but the closest he came to running for political office was when his campaign had been canceled due to the FCC's "Equal Time" rule. His only involvement after that had been to make personal appearances at fundraisers for political candidates. Gordon's efforts made him many powerful contacts in government, but he wanted to take a more hands-on approach. His opportunity to get involved came in late 1976 when Ed Hinson asked him to be the campaign manager for his bid for Hillsborough County Judge. Gordon accepted and said he

thought Hinson could understand "the human side of the law because of his more than ten years of business experience dealing with people before he entered law school."

Ed Hinson certainly wasn't the only one aware of the fact that Gordon's public appearances drew a lot of attention wherever he went in Florida. "Wrestling Fans Came to See Solie" was the title of Steve Lewis's column for the Highlander in January 1977.

> It wasn't that Solie did anything unusual. In fact, he did very little except announce the "vital statistics" of the wrestlers. However, because of his famous television interviews, despite hostile elements, Gordon Solie has become a personality recognized throughout the sport. The fans react to him. It was Gordon who was sought after for autographs, not the wrestlers. And it was Gordon who obliged every seeker. The wrestlers understand the bucks wouldn't be so big

without him. Since money is the name of the game, Solie is an integral part of it. ("Wrestling Fans")

When speaking to Lewis, Gordon estimated that around 5,000,000 people at the time were watching Championship Wrestling from Florida each week. For a regionally syndicated television program, those were huge numbers.

The interviews flowed on: Gordon and Joe LeDuc were pictured in the Florida Times-Union (Jacksonville) "TV Week", and Gordon engaged in a one-hour "verbal match" with Mike Miller, a late-night television host in Orlando.

The news coverage seemed like déjà vu to Gordon, although the focus in the '70s had shifted to wrestling, whereas media coverage in the '60s centered on his involvement in stock car racing. Another difference was the attention drawn to him in public due to his television appearances. With Ted Turner sending out GCW by satellite, Gordon

became the first pro wrestling announcer to be broadcast in such a manner.

On January 23, 1977, the St. Petersburg Times began a six-part series devoted to professional wrestling. The author, Mike Tierney, titled one section "Mouthpiece of the Mat," and described Gordon's voice: "Gordon Solie's vocal chords should be stamped 'Made in Heaven,' or at least 'Approved by Cosell.'"

When the interview with Tierney got around to injuries, Gordon said, "Wrestlers are the last of the rugged individuals." Tierney shared his point of view:

> Pro wrestling stands apart from other sports in many ways, but the most conflicting example is their willingness to publicize injuries. Fatalities during matches are documented. Ox Baker, one of Tampa's most-hated villains, was in the ring twice when his opponents dropped dead. Shortly after

arriving in Tampa, he managed to break the nose of a fellow known as the Assassin while Gordon was attempting to conduct an interview. Danny Hodge wrestled in Tampa until 1974, when a meanie named Tanaka nearly killed him. (4C)

Ox Baker had his own thoughts about the apparent violence during his matches. In regard to his match with Ray Gunkel, after which Gunkel died, Ox said, "Ray slammed down ten or 15 pieces of fried chicken before the match. In fact, he was beating on me for several minutes, and during that time, he was regurgitating some of the chicken. I think he actually burst his own heart." Afterward, no one wanted to tell the fans it was an accident, and when asked about Gunkel's death, Ox maintained his persona and said, "I just like to hurt people."

According to Ox Baker, he put himself over to the fans more with his hard talk than he did with his wrestling. When asked how Gordon Solie

helped him and other wrestlers, Baker stated, "Gordon stayed even-keeled during interviews and let you do your shtick. He was one of the guys and no one said anything bad about him. If he wasn't the best wrestling announcer ever, he was certainly one of the best. Gordon deliberately mispronounced some words like 'suplex,' and said 'suplay' for example, because he said it drew more attention that way."

Despite all the publicity about professional wrestling and its popularity, many in the amateur ranks turned up their noses at the pros. Amateur coaches in Florida voted a couple of years earlier to classify professional wrestling matches as exhibitions, and hadn't really changed their opinion. Mike Tierney stated that Coach John Heath thought that was wrong because various high schools accepted a portion of the proceeds when CWF did benefits, and then later, continued to condemn the pro ranks. Heath estimated that CWF donations to schools from pro wrestling benefits totaled $60,000 in 1976 alone. Complaints from

the amateur ranks, however, did little or nothing to slow down business as the fans continued to fill the arenas.

In his series on professional wrestling, Mike Tierney wrote about the disparity between the NWA matches and smaller competing promotions (1C). The Tampa Armory was packed to the rafters every week, but 20 miles away, it was a different story. While the Armory was drawing 4,000 to 5,000 people every week, the IWA promoter, Skip Portz, put on his own shows for small crowds. It wasn't any wonder with a headliner called the "Masked Cockroach." Before one of Portz' shows, the police got an anonymous telephone call telling them there was no accredited doctor present for medical emergencies. As a result, the show was canceled. Portz told Tierney he thought the phone call came from someone in the NWA.

The St. Petersburg Times got a lot of feedback about Tierney's wrestling series, and 90 percent of the comments were positive. One man, however,

wrote in to condemn pro wrestling as "professional tumbling," and as a bad influence on children. Paul Rushe was a news editor for Channel 44, the same station that aired CWF on Saturday evenings, and he announced some IWA wrestling cards in Dade City. Rushe responded to the Times' series to express his contempt for Eddie Graham and the NWA:

> Chicanery being one of professional wrestling's 'virtues,' Mr. Graham threatened to pull his wrestling shows from Channel 44, if I were not duly chastised. This action followed an anonymous phone call stating, "If you don't quit announcing those Dade City matches, we'll take care of you." This was not nearly as vicious a warning as some of the grapplers had received who had been warned that their legs would be broken and threats made on their families. IWA and I both persisted, since we thought we still lived in the land of free enterprise. In light of my abrupt discharge, I found I was mistaken. The

> method in my firing was to claim I was taking some sort of payola … (“Response Heavy" 12C)

Good or bad, it was all publicity for Championship Wrestling from Florida. The Tampa Tribune again took notice of wrestling’s and Gordon’s popularity when the paper had a booth at Monroe Junior High for an innovative sports-media day. In "The Morning After" column on February 12, 1977, Tom McEwen described the event:

> The Tribune, because it had an eye-catching video display writing device for illustration, tied with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers for second-most attention from the students. Easily the biggest draw of career day was Gordon Solie, the Eric Sevareid of professional wrestling commentators. (5C)

And so it was. At one moment, someone was criticizing wrestling, and in the next, someone else

was pouring out accolades to the “voice" of wrestling." Gordon received more praise in a letter dated March 2, 1977. The correspondence was from Houston, Texas, wrestling promoter Paul Boesch:

> “You have been on my program a number of times, and I have always admired the workman like manner in which you do your job. But to be on your program and be part of your effort is to understand that you are the eye of the hurricane, the calm in the midst of the storm, that is so essential. If you ever come to Texas and do not come to Houston, we will have a posse out to round you up.”

On March 16, 1977, Bill Brubaker wrote about the grapplers in the Miami News:

> Miami Beach ring announcer Frank Freeman telephones this paper each week with results from the Wednesday night wrestling matches. His phone calls have become something of an

> office joke. Freeman will report, with the urgency of a war correspondent, how Dusty Rhodes whipped Ox Baker in a Texas bullrope match, and how the Masked Assassin crunched Superstar Billy Graham in a lights-out "death thriller." (1B)

Despite the humorous jabs, Brubaker pointed out that pro wrestling simply could not be ignored. Not when 4,000 people paid money every week at Miami Beach, and three local TV stations carried the matches in both English and Spanish. Chris Dundee, the local promoter, was grossing $300,000 to $400,000 a year, and top wrestlers like Dusty Rhodes left the Miami Beach Auditorium on Wednesday nights with up to $4,000 in their pockets (2B). The big change for Dundee was security. Previously, he hired three or four police officers, but that number soon rose to twenty. Fans had to be held in check when "bad guys" like Ox Baker went to and from the ring. People hit Baker with chairs. They spit in his face, slapped him, and kicked him. Baker never hit back

because he knew that he was the reason the fans were riled up, and his "bad guy" persona made him a lot of money.

When the matches were over, "good guys" and "bad guys" alike had lots of ladies waiting for them outside the arenas, motel keys in hand. For single wrestlers, it was a gift. They had a free room for the night, not to mention other assorted perks. Wrestler Kevin Sullivan told Brubaker, "I'll put it this way. If you're in the business and you're single, unless you're going to be a priest, you've made it with a groupie" (B1). The temptation was too great for some married wrestlers as well, and succumbing to temptation made staying married a difficult situation. Gordon called groupies, or in wrestling parlance, "arena rats," "a phenomenon that has swept the country," and told Brubaker that the groupies were an "undeniable part of professional wrestling" (B3).

It was an era with a tremendous amount of paper communication between wrestling offices around

the world, whether it was a newspaper, letter, or periodical. A steady barrage passed through Gordon's hands, including copies of business correspondence, thank-you mail, and fan mail. It wasn't all positive, either. Gordon would regularly receive 40 to 50 letters a week that actually chastised him. Some fans were appalled that he remained so calm when their favorite wrestler was under attack by a "bad guy." Others complained about Gordon's apparent indifference when insults were hurled back and forth between wrestlers during an interview. Fans wanted to know why Gordon didn't put a stop to some of the "mayhem." As if Gordon, at 5-foot-9 and 165 pounds, could discipline two guys who tipped the scales at 250 to 300 pounds.

Gordon saved a large amount of fan mail in with his writing files over the years. On May 9, 1977, a lady wrote to Bob Neal at WTCG Channel 17 in Atlanta, expressing her enjoyment of GCW, and her disappointment when the media mocked her pastime: "Few would ever know that Mr.

Wrestling was an excellent photographer, as well as being a fine wrestler, that he plays several musical instruments, that he has many trophies for his car racing, that he is an expert with a gun, and builds many phases of audio equipment. He and the majority of his co-workers are unusually interesting men. They certainly are not the stereo-type truck driver types that resemble beer-drinking gorillas that so many sportswriters and uninformed pen jockeys make them out to be."

A second wrote, "Sunday evening, we watched your Sportsweek show and enjoyed it very much. Although we are not professional wrestling fans, we did enjoy the interviews done with the two gentlemen in masks. Both men were intelligent, informative, and interesting individuals, and certainly disproved the rumors heard about the profession. We called this very morning to order tickets to our first wrestling match ever, and hope we can view the two gentlemen we saw on your show."

Two days later, Gordon received a pleasant thank-you letter for his contribution to an upcoming testimonial in Tampa. The letter was from Robert L. Shevin, attorney general for the state of Florida.

Gordon even took time to make appearances for children, and in August 1977, he visited the children's department at the Tampa-Hillsborough Public Library. Sharon Davis, the head of the children's department, wrote a letter stating that Gordon's program had "the largest attendance of any special program all summer."

In certain parts on Florida's east coast, fans could catch Gordon commentating wrestling as many as five times over a weekend as the hour-long show aired at different intervals. Diehard fans could also catch the Detroit wresting program with host Lord Athol Layton in the Cocoa-Rockledge area, as well as a wrestling program that aired from North Carolina. According to Ken Hoffman's column in Today, at one time, there were nine hours of professional wrestling programs filling

the airwaves each weekend.

Gordon spent as many as seven hours per session taping the weekly show at the Sportatorium. Because CWF aired in 13 markets in Florida and 13 markets in Georgia, it was necessary to have the wrestlers tape 13 different interviews for distribution. Gordon described the distribution of the show as a "bicycle." Tapes of the show were sent to four stations for airing, and they in turn forwarded the tapes to four other stations, and so forth until all 26 markets had aired the show. Gordon's sons, Greg and Eric, had the responsibility to make sure the tapes were complete, copied, and sent off to the various stations. It didn't matter if Greg and Eric had to work until the wee hours of the night. The tapes had to get out.

As much as Gordon enjoyed his role in wrestling, he constantly felt the need to spread his wings and try new business ventures. In November 1977, Gordon and a man named Harold Maridon

collaborated to form Sol-Mar Productions, Inc., in order to promote the "St. Petersburg In-Water Sail and Power Boat Show." With offices in the Bayfront Center, Sol-Mar set up a reservation hotline and the phone rang off the hook. The news release from Gordon advertised that "the majority of the respected and coveted names in the boating industry are already represented — Gulfstar, Black Fin, Heritage, Excalibur, Pacemaker, Pequot, Morgan, Endeavor, Watkins, Prairie, Irwin, Colombia, and Marine Trader…" Another part of Gordon's press release read: "And with 21,000 sq. ft. of covered display area to house the finest in boating equipment and the marine world's modern technology, 'something for everyone' is the old cliché that's tailor-made for the St. Petersburg show." Gordon tied in the three-day event to the grand opening of a facility named South Mole Municipal Marina.

Dozens of exhibitors showed off their products, and the events included the U.S. Navy Ceremonial Band, the Miss St. Petersburg Sail and Power Boat

Bikini Contest, nautical fashion shows, hydroplane exhibitions and racing, the Weeki Wachee mermaids, and the Marine Industries' pram race. Thousands of patrons packed the docks each day.

Despite Gordon's successful promotion of the boat show, his primary recognition continued to come from professional wrestling, and he remained fair game for the press. In a mini-roast of sports personalities, Chuck Roames of the Fort Myers News Press wrote, "Everybody knows that pro wrestling is 90 percent show business, fakery, and pure acting. Solie acts like he's reporting the assassination of a president" (C1). Under the accompanying photo of Gordon was the caption "Gordon Solie … thinks pro wrestling is real."

Regardless, Gordon continued to handle the play-by-play and interviews as seriously as the day he began. The exception to the rule was the occasional "blooper." Photographer Danny Goddard remembered when Gordon was doing both the Florida show and the Georgia program.

"They flew him into Atlanta on the weekends and we taped TV on Saturday mornings at Ted Turner's station, WTBS," Danny recalled. "Mr. Wrestling (Tim Woods) had unmasked in Florida, but he had not unmasked in Georgia yet. This was when wrestling was still territorial, so the average fan didn't know what was happening outside his or her area. While we were taping Georgia Championship Wrestling, I was standing behind the TV cameras shooting my pictures. Mr. Wrestling was in the ring. Gordon was standing outside the ring, and he was trying to get Mr. Wrestling's attention to have him come over for an impromptu interview. While taping, Gordon barked 'Mr. Wrestling' a time or two, but Mr. Wrestling didn't hear Gordon. Then Gordon barked out, 'Tim!' He quickly went back to 'Mr. Wrestling.' I don't think anyone noticed, but I certainly did."

Danny talked about another Saturday morning studio session on the set of GCW. "We taped around ten or eleven o'clock in the morning, and the program aired that evening at six p.m. There

was a live studio audience and Professor Toru Tanaka was going to have a demonstration during his interview with Gordon Solie. Tanaka came out with a board and he and Gordon discussed how he was going to break that board in half with a karate chop. Gordon was building it up by explaining how strong and skilled Tanaka was in martial arts. Just then, while holding the board with one hand, the board split in half and one half of it fell to the floor. It obviously had been pre-sawn. Neither Gordon nor Tanaka knew what to do. Tanaka seemed to chuckle and Gordon stuttered over some words. The studio fans roared with laughter. Tanaka grabbed another board and demonstrated his feat. That evening, I watched the program on TV, and when that accidental moment came, the screen went black and they said they were having technical difficulties. Within a few seconds it came back on and showed Tanaka breaking the second board. I remember the look on Gordon's face. He was in total shock."

Opinions varied about professional wrestling,

but one thing was for sure — it was big business. In describing results from the previous year (1976), Chicago Sun Times' columnist James Warren wrote that 9,000 wrestling shows a year were put on in the United States, with an average of 3,000 to 4,000 people in attendance at each show. That alone raised some eyebrows because that tied wrestling with college football attendance, and third behind horse and auto racing. With more than 27,000,000 in paid attendance, professional wrestling ranked higher than Major League Baseball or college basketball (Warren 1C).

Florida certainly helped the numbers with live shows, with cards running every night of the week; Monday in West Palm Beach, Tuesday in Tampa and Fort Myers, Wednesday in Miami, Thursday in Jacksonville, Friday in Tallahassee and Fort Lauderdale, Saturday in St. Petersburg, and Sunday in Orlando, not to mention the countless "spot shows" held in smaller cities throughout the state. In the Georgia territory, besides running regular

weekly cards at the Atlanta City Auditorium, monthly shows at the Omni drew crowds of between 12,000 and 16,000. Wrestling cards were also held weekly in every major city in Georgia.

As 1977 neared an end, Gordon was still trying to get a handle on the financial outcome of the boat show. Even Logan Browning, Gordon's friend and C.P.A., couldn't make a complete report because information was still lacking. On the first day of the show, Sol-Mar Production's designated ticket takers showed up, only to find out that city employees were manning the ticket booths. Eileen (Smoky) Solie and Harold Maridon later made the rounds to collect the ticket money, but found it had been transferred to the Bayfront Center office. Needless to say, with three different sets of workers present, representing Sol-Mar, the city of St. Petersburg, and the Bayfront Center, it became confusing. With more than 5,000 people a day in attendance and the booth fees paid by vendors, Gordon had expected to make some money, but due to circumstances, it didn't look like that was going

to happen. Instead, he had a handful of account receivables and had to seek counsel to help sort out the mess. Gordon received communication from attorney Edgar A. Hinson, who investigated the matter with the City of St. Petersburg: "As to listening to our claims concerning the ticket receipts, I detected nothing but arrogance and disbelief. I did at least receive a letter from the city's attorney telling me that in view of our new allegations, he would check the matter out further and get back to me. I don't anticipate anything of any substance will happen …"

Although Gordon failed in his side ventures, he continued to receive positive recognition in his principal occupation from fans and wrestlers alike. Professional wrestler Stan Hansen began making appearances on Georgia Championship Wrestling in October 1977. His description of Gordon was simple and direct: "Gordon was a class act," claimed Hansen. "I bogarted all over television announcers during my wrestling interviews. In Gordon's case, I pushed the envelope, but that's as

far as I went. He was the top announcer in the south at the time. He had the right look and delivery into the camera, he had an outstanding vocabulary, he dressed well, and he put an educated spin on our business."

Down south in Miami, Gordon appeared at the "Super Bowl of Wrestling" which was held at the Orange Bowl on January 25, 1978, with both the NWA and the WWWF titles on the line. Promoters expected 20,000 to 30,000 fans to attend the card, but heavy rains reduced the crowd down to around 12,000. The main event was a 60-minute stalemate between the two champs, "Superstar" Billy Graham [WWWF] and Harley Race [NWA]. Graham told Bill Brubaker of the Miami News that he got winded late in the match and felt lucky to finish with a draw. Both men had planned to take home $25,000 before the inclement weather lowered the gate.

"Gordon was probably the absolute best commentator quality-wise," said Wayne Coleman,

who wrestled for more than two decades as "Superstar" Billy Graham. "He could make a guy who was a poor technical wrestler sound like a Greco-Roman champion. He was so smooth that words were like butter coming off his lips." (from Scripps Howard News Service)

One of the fans in attendance was the kind of follower referred to as a "closet wrestling fan." He grew up watching Gordon Solie and Championship Wrestling from Florida on a UHF channel in New York. Like a lot of people at the time, Jeff Bukantz kept his wrestling fervor to himself. During his youth, Jeff was exposed to an entirely different type of athletic event. His dad was Danny Bukantz, a man famous for representing the United States at four Olympic Games due to his expertise in fencing. Jeff was aspiring to make his own place in fencing, but during a break in training, he managed to convince a buddy to make a trip to the Sunshine State. He failed to mention the part about wanting to attend the big wrestling event.

Once he realized his goal and found himself at the Orange Bowl, Jeff crossed paths with a wrestler by the name of Ken Patera. "He was covered in Dusty's blood after the match," said Jeff, "but we struck up a conversation and had a nice talk. I ended up going out that night and having drinks with Ken. We got a late start after the show, and before I knew it, it was three o'clock in the morning. Our conversation didn't meet the normal "kayfabe" rules between a wrester and a fan. Yes, I was a fan, but evidently Ken was comfortable speaking to me a little more like one of the guys.

"I happen to look up from our table and saw Harley Race heading our way, and he proceeded to join us. He knew Ken, but I was a stranger, so Harley said, 'If that referee had counted a little faster, I would have had him [referring to his match with Superstar Graham].' I almost wanted to laugh, and Ken must have sensed that, because he leaned over and quietly said to me, 'How about a little professional courtesy?' I obliged and acted more like a mark, but it really didn't change my

enthusiasm. I was thrilled just to be there, sitting in a club having a drink with professional wrestlers, Ken Patera and Harley Race."

Between events, Gordon was still trying to sort through the finances surrounding the Sol-Mar boat show. Although the boating community loved the event and hoped it would be an annual affair, the aggravation over the accounting mess deterred Gordon from even considering a repeat performance.

During the first week of March 1978, Gordon flew to Knoxville, Tennessee to do color commentary for the Southeastern Championship Wrestling television program. During and after the show, he interviewed Charlie Cook, Reuben Gibson, the Assassins, Ron Fuller, and Jack Brisco. The Islanders, David Schultz, Burrhead Jones, Bob Armstrong, Roy Lee Welch, Ali Zaatar, Mike Stallings, and Doug Gilbert were participants in the televised matches. At one of his house show appearances in the "Volunteer State,"

Gordon arrived at the venue to see the following advertisement.

The same week, Gordon was in St. Maarten, N.A. [Niederlandische Antillen, or Netherlands Antilles] for a wrestling card at the Hillside Drive-In. It was an attempt by the NWA and Popular Agencies, N.V. [Naamloze Vennootschap, or limited liability company] to bring live wrestling matches not only to St. Maarten, but to other parts of the Caribbean, as well. It was the second NWA show ever held on the island and the 1,400 fans in attendance enjoyed the matches, which featured Rocky Johnson in the main event. Unfortunately, as Len Stein relayed to Gordon in a letter dated March 8, 1978, he and his partner were unhappy with the financial arrangements they had made with Eddie Graham. A trip to Tampa after the first show to discuss the situation with Graham had been "dismissed out of hand."

Stein indicated he believed the NWA also was unhappy with its cut of the proceeds due to Jack

Brisco making a statement to him about the NWA losing money on the show, which drew a gate of $7,500. In his closing comment in the letter, he said, "Let me say this, it was an artistic success. The fans enjoyed themselves. They liked the girls best because they were always wrestling."

On March 27, 1978, Peter King sent Gordon an advance copy of Gordon's "Hotseat" interview, which was to be published in the May 1978 edition of Inside Wrestling. Evidently, Gordon was the first non-wrestler to be featured in the magazine's "Hotseat" column. The article, by Peter King, also mentioned that Gordon was the "first man in history to interview both the NWA champion, Harley Race, and the WWWF champion, Superstar Graham, on national television" (24). On top of that, according to King's column, Gordon was voted "Announcer of the Year" by the readers for the second year in a row.

The fans loved positive comments from the media about Gordon and the wrestlers, but they

took umbrage at reporters who wrote derogatory articles about their favorite sport. Jack Kofoed of the Miami Herald wrote disparaging remarks about the mentality of parents who let their children go to the wrestling matches. He alleged that the matches were great places for children to learn brutal behavior and poor sportsmanship. A lady named Sandy Willoughby took offense at Kofoed's column and responded that pro wrestling provided an emotional outlet for thousands of people, and the wrestlers donated so much to the youth, and the three-thousand youth that came to the matches in Miami hung out around the "good guy," Dusty Rhodes, not around the bad guys.

Kofoed took the time to personally respond to her, and also mentioned in a follow-up column that a lady wrestling fan didn't like it when her pastime was criticized. She didn't change his mind, and he finished part of his column with more claims about how children learning bad habits at the matches, like how to hurt people, how to violate rules, how to brag, and so forth.

A lot of folks in Tampa didn't agree with Kofoed's low opinion of pro wrestling. Tampa's Saturday night wrestling show on WTOG-CH 44 whipped all "sports and news programs on the three other network stations from sign-on to sign-off" (D1). Sunday's program, The Best of Championship Wrestling, had more viewers than any prime-time show on ABC, other than Happy Days and Laverne and Shirley. In the April 30, 1978 edition of the Clearwater Sun, Gary Metzger voiced his opinion in about the high TV ratings: "And the man you have to thank (or curse as the case may be) for bringing wrestling to the acme in popularity it enjoys is Gordon Solie" (D1).

Gordon was adored by millions, and yet, he remained a target for the media. With an almost arrogant disrespect, reporters continued to make fun of Gordon's chosen business. Another writer from the Clearwater Sun, Ed Meyer, decided to sit with 5,000 fans at the Armory in Tampa to watch Dusty Rhodes and Terry Funk engage in a Texas Bunkhouse match against Spoiler #1 and Spoiler

#2. Meyer described the situation that took place in June 1978:

> As near as I can figure it out, a Texas Bunk House Match is a tag-team event in which the participants may wear any cowboy gear they choose – boots, ten-gallon hats, brass belt buckles, even spurs. I was not smart enough to figure this out for myself. A guy, who was sitting behind me shaving his fingernails with a six-inch pocket knife, had to tell me. (D1)

The belittling of pro wrestling didn't end with just newspaper articles. Because of Gordon's prowess with a microphone and experience in various roles of studio production, a Tampa TV executive asked Gordon, "Would you mind coming over to the station and assisting our staff with stage direction and some other broadcasting tips?" Gordon said he'd be delighted to help. The next time the two men had lunch, Gordon found out that he was not going to help out at the TV station. During a meeting, station board members had

decided that they couldn't have a professional wrestling announcer coming in to help out their broadcast team.

However, it seemed as if every time the media knocked pro wrestling, the world of grappling bounced back with something positive. During the same month, June 1978, a group of All-American high school wrestlers checked out the new 40-foot by 60-foot workout room at the University of Florida. Numerous stories surfaced relaying the fact that five of the All-Americans decided to sign with the college, and they represented the best wrestling recruits in the history of the school. The construction of the workout room, which began in late 1977, was due to the financial assistance of a pro wrestling promoter — Eddie Graham.

During his interview with Bob Austin of the Tampa Tribune, Eddie recalled the status of amateur wrestling 20 years before, when there wasn't even one high school team in the state of Florida. Shortly after John Heath put together the

first high school team at St. Martha's High School in Sarasota, Eddie helped Tampa Jefferson develop a wrestling program and footed most of the bill for the coach's salary. Austin added that after two decades, wrestling had risen to the 5th most-popular high school sport in Florida.

As the host for wrestling shows in Tampa, Atlanta, Dothan and Knoxville, Gordon was the most well-known broadcaster in professional wrestling. His popularity was put to the test during the summer of 1978 when Jim Barnett, the majority stockholder of Georgia Championship Wrestling, gave Gordon an ultimatum. Jay West recalled the circumstances when their star host briefly parted company with Georgia Championship Wrestling. West was a ring announcer for GCW at the time, and worked primarily during the live events at the Atlanta City Auditorium. Later, he announced at the Omni and many of the smaller venues, like Marietta and Griffin. In 1974, he also did the ring announcing for a few months on channel 17 before Freddie Miller took over that task.

One Friday night, Jay got a frantic call from Freddie, telling him that he needed Jay to begin doing the ring announcing on TV again because "Gordon wouldn't be available for awhile," and Freddie was taking over the play-by-play duties. Jay thought that was strange because he hadn't heard anything from the locals about Gordon being unavailable. When he arrived at the studio for the taping the next morning, everything was hush-hush, and Freddie opened the show with no real explanation for Gordon's absence. Freddie was a capable announcer, but he was no Gordon Solie. In addition, Freddie also had his hands full with a lot of behind-the-scenes tasks, so Jay knew something wasn't right.

Later, Jay approached Freddie, stating that he needed a little more information regarding how long he would be needed, because he usually worked a radio job on Saturdays, and that was conflicting with the ring announcing. Freddie spilled the beans and told Jay that Gordon quit because of a requirement from Jim Barnett that

Gordon stop doing the Saturday afternoon show in Dothan, Alabama. Gordon was always on a tight schedule and anxious to leave Atlanta after the Saturday morning show in order to make it to Dothan for his next broadcast. The GCW folks decided that since they were paying Gordon a premium salary to do the Atlanta show, they felt they had the right to dictate Gordon's hours. They expected him to stay around to finish up if the taping dragged on, or if additional promos needed to be cut. Gordon felt a loyalty to his commitment in Dothan, so he "balked and walked," according to Jay.

Jay added that Gordon was gone with no real explanation, but it was obvious at the time that GCW needed Gordon more than the other way around. The channel 17 switchboard lit up with questions from viewers about Gordon's absence. Seven or eight weeks later, Gordon and GCW came to an agreement and he returned. Freddie was relieved of his responsibility for the play-by-play commentary, but he continued to bring out "special

updates" for Gordon on the studio shows. Jay continued as ring announcer for house shows until March 1981.

Wrestler Paul Jones said there was another reason that Gordon liked to leave the GCW studios in a timely manner: "Gordon and I used to make a beeline for the Atlanta airport after the Saturday studio work. If we got there in time, one of the private clubs would give us free drinks before our departure."

On September 3, 1978, Michael Kilgore wrote about Gordon in an article titled "He's Calm Amidst Wrestling Mayhem." Gordon downplayed his role and gave credit for CWF's television success to the wrestlers and to his sons, Greg and Eric. Greg handled the editing from a mobile truck, while Eric worked on the studio floor. Gordon thought they made CWF more appealing to young viewers with a new lead-in and more contemporary music.

As the voice of wrestling, Gordon was in a class by himself, and continued to receive stacks of mail from his followers. One of his adoring Florida fans expressed concern, however, over the new cast of wrestlers in Florida. She favored the "good guys" like Dusty, the Briscos, and Mike Graham, but was disgusted with new developments by Sonny King and his comrades:

> Why isn't Sonny King ordered out of the area? He sounds like a throwback to the Al Capone era, a gangster muscling in and taking over the territory. This is incredible. Next, let me say that I blame Harley Race for bringing that unholy trio into the state, for the sole purpose of disabling and/or killing Dusty, so great is his fear of losing the title. Dusty had him beat, as far as that goes, and then the interference. Not only do I blame Harley Race, I thoroughly despise anyone who would feel he had to resort to such a thing. World champion, indeed.

Gordon's fan mail was diversified and one letter … well … it was from a little boy, and it was the kind of letter that got Gordon all choked up.

Dear Mr. Solie,
My name is Teddy and I live in Greenville, South Carolina. My daddy is writing this letter for me, because I have had to be in the hospital for a long time. The doctors have told mommy and daddy that I have cancer and will not live for long. Daddy's crying while he's writing your letter and me too.
Mr. Solie, I don't want to die but I know when I do I will go to be with Jesus in Heaven. I watch wrestling on the Super Station 2 hours every Saturday. Mr. Solie, please do me a big favor. I like to watch girl wrestlers. Will you please show a film of girls wrestling next week or sometime real soon? That will make me happy Mr. Solie. I have never seen girls wrestle but two times. Please show some. Please Mr. Solie. When I get to Heaven I will tell the Lord how nice

you are.
Teddy
And tell Freddy hello, I like him too.

Throughout his career, Gordon shared the contents of that letter with his friends and family, and he always got emotional when he talked about it.

In March 1979, Gordon turned his attention to a new contract. James Barnett, the promoter of Georgia Championship Wrestling, also was a stockholder in the Florida wrestling promotion. Barnett had contacted David Togie, of the David Togie Agency, and signed an authorization to provide 100 CWF programs before April 1, 1979, to Ivey Communications. According to the agreement, Ivey Communications was authorized to distribute and broadcast CWF to countries in the Middle East such as the United Arab Emirates, Quatar, Kuwait, Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, and Yemen.

For their part, CWF would be paid a fee of $150 per program, in installments, for a total of $15,000. The fees would be split between Championship Wrestling from Florida, Inc. (50%), Gordon Solie (35%), and the David Togie Agency (15%). There were no live NWA events for people in the Middle East, and by distributing taped shows there, the citizens could watch matches with top-notch talent like the NWA champion, Harley Race.

Chapter 9: The Great Malenko vs The Mattress

Gordon tries to avoid getting involved in the action as Ole Anderson and Tony Atlas clash on the TV set

Fan mail addressed to Gordon kept arriving in piles on a regular basis. When a correspondence made a big impression on Gordon, he would tuck it away for safe keeping. One such letter came from a

woman in New York, who watched Championship Wrestling from Florida every Tuesday night at 11 PM on Channel WNJU. Although she was very fond of Gordon, she was extremely upset because the shows were two or three weeks old by the time she saw them, and the format had changed. Part of her letter read as follows:

> Your new format is confusing because it is a potpourri of jumbled matches. You splice your film to jam in one or two new matches and expect us to be satisfied. I, for one, am getting sick and tired and extremely bored with seeing matches that I've seen at least seven or eight times. You also mix up on the chronological order so that the events either perplex the viewers or give them redundant information that has become irrelevant with the present.
> A few of your personality sessions were good. The ones with Jack Brisco, Steve Keirn and Mike Graham were interesting. These men have intelligence and depth. Others like

Andre, Sonny King, and etc … were merely a waste of time … an hour signifying nothing. Predominantly interview-inclined shows should be conducted rarely and only with interesting subjects. Otherwise, it becomes blasé.

Please include more about the personal lives of the wrestlers. For instance, the brief documentary on Mike Graham's training for the Harley Race title bout, and Steve's Keirn's hospitalization and road to recovery, did shed some light on these men outside the ring. Nothing is as disheartening as listening to past history reiterated ceaselessly. Sonny King's tenuous odious prattle and his vile, fulsome, retrograding personality is omnipresent and a torture to endure.

The Florida show's counterpart, Georgia Championship Wrestling, which aired nationwide on Ted Turner's Superstation, was the main topic of the NWA promoters' meeting on August 3-4, 1979, at the Sahara Hotel in Las Vegas. Concerns

were expressed by some promoters who didn't like the fact that wrestling from other territories overlapped into their own. Mike LeBell, the promoter of the southern California territory, said promoters would simply have to learn to live with the appearance of outside shows on cable in the various towns in which they promoted. There was additional discussion in regard to the number of "champions" appearing on television and the confusion which resulted from this. Barnett agreed that cable could not be stopped, and that he hoped to reduce any confusion which may have been created by his show appearing on cable by stating that the "champions" on his show were Georgia champions.

Although Gordon no longer had ties to the ovals and was strictly involved in wrestling, he still valued one of his old racing investments: Suncoast Speedways, Inc. He made a decision to position the company for future wrestling activities, and in September 1979, he filed official documents to change the name of the company to Gordon Solie

Enterprises, Inc. Gordon thought there might be a time when he could promote wrestling events through the corporation.

There was a more pressing issue at the time, however, and it stemmed from a wrestling performance at the Bayfront Center. Back in the spring, Gordon had been in the ring with Dusty Rhodes when Don Muraco came charging in like a maniac. Gordon quickly got out of the way, but in the process, slipped when he hit the floor outside the ring. He hurt his leg, and did even more damage to his ankle. When advised to have surgery to repair the ankle injury, he refused and just decided to live with it. He was fifty years old at the time and was enjoying good health, so he thought he could cope the injury without undergoing a medical procedure. Gordon should have opted for immediate surgery because it was the beginning of problems that would plague him for years. Besides dealing with an injury that just didn't seem to heal, Gordon became addicted to the pain medication he was taking. Over time, he

managed to overcome the addiction, but he knew that sooner or later, he would be seeking the services of a highly-skilled surgeon.

During the same time, Gordon's mail continued to include requests and thank you notes: the Sertoma Club of New Port Richey sought out Gordon as a guest speaker; the Tampa Tribune thanked him for his letter commending Tampa law enforcement; the Juvenile Welfare Board of Pinellas County thanked him for sending Steve Keirn and Manny Fernandez for "Dixieland in December for Dependent Children," at which the wrestlers helped raise more than 3,000 gifts for foster children.

As 1979 came to a close, Gordon finished his 30th year of association with pro wrestling, and the NWA looked to the future with Bob Geigel as their president. Fellow board members included Mike LeBell, Nick Gulas, Jim Barnett, Jack Adkisson (aka Fritz Von Erich), Jim Crockett, Jr., Dory Funk, Jr., Vince McMahon, Don Owen, and

Fred Ward.

Despite the success of the professional wrestling industry, Americans were still strongly divided on their opinions in regard to the sport. On the one hand, there were fans of professional wrestling, and on the other hand, there were those who just could not understand how anyone could possibly be interested in such a faked blue-collar spectacle. One example was a lady who got sick and tired of her husband and two boys watching Georgia Championship Wrestling, and talking about the match results for days. In a column for The Atlanta Journal and Constitution Magazine, Barbara Schneider mentioned that the woman wanted her sons to enjoy the "finer" things of life, so she took her sons to cultural events. When she did, however, they complained that they were missing wrestling.

When the announcement was made that Georgia Championship Wrestling was only going to run two more shows at Atlanta's Municipal Auditorium,

Mom decided to go along with her husband and sons. That night, according to Schneider, the mom saw Gorgeous George, Jr. direct Killer Khan to victory, wrestlers Ray Candy, Killer Karl Kox, Jack Brisco, and Austin Idol, and in the grand finale, Ivan Koloff and Alexis Smirnoff faced off against Ole Anderson and Jerry Brisco. Bodies flew out of the ring, Anderson's face was a "crimson mask" (Gordon's words), and Jerry Brisco beat Smirnoff with the title belt. When the match ended, her husband pointed something out to her. While standing on her seat, she had been unconsciously clutching the arm of a student who sat next to her. The lady was converted on the spot.

As the NWA continued to expand, the trend for house shows [live shows at arenas and auditoriums, as opposed to television] was to do it bigger and better. In television, radio, and newspapers, Gordon advertised an event called "Hollywood Star Wars Championship '80," which he said would be the biggest wrestling card ever held in Florida. The Fabulous Moolah was booked

on the February 15, 1980 show against Wendi Richter for the women's world title, along with Andre the Giant and "Cowboy" Bill Watts versus Ernie Ladd and Leroy Brown, Tommy Rich versus Bugsy McGraw for the Florida TV title, Mr. Fujinami defending the NWA international junior heavyweight title against Mike Graham, and Harley Race versus Dusty Rhodes in a steel cage match with the NWA world heavyweight title at stake. In an interview prior to the event, Gordon told journalist Bob Rubin that there would be 11 matches and fans could buy tickets ranging from $5 to $12.

Afterward, one of the fans who attended the big show wrote to Gordon to tell him that it was "one of the best nights of entertainment ever." She also let Gordon know she had contacted Bob Rubin of the Miami Herald. Rubin had written a preview of the event and then devoted a page to the results. Gordon's fan didn't care for Rubin's analysis of the event and informed him:

I find it hard to believe that a sportswriter for a major newspaper would just discover that professional wrestling is a “pseudosport." I, then, find it hard to believe that the sportswriter would devote the amount of print space that you did in trying to expose the sport of pro wrestling as a "fraud." I would have enjoyed reading either a review of the show or a report on the matches. In between your review and/or reporting, I was forced to read your unfavorable editorializing on a source of entertainment for thousands of people …”

Rubin did have a notable encounter when preparing for his article titled "Pro Wrestling; Bloody Good Show." He managed to get a few words from wrestler Ernie Ladd, the same Ernie Ladd who was an All-Pro tackle for the Kansas City Chiefs, and the same Ernie Ladd who stood six-foot-nine and weighed more than 300 pounds. When Rubin wanted to know what Ladd said to people who thought pro wrestling was faked, Ernie

replied:

> You’re a writer, so you can word it any way you want. But how ‘bout you say, "I looked at Ernie Ladd and told him wrestling is phony." Then you can say, "Ernie Ladd glared at me and replied, ‘Okay, if it’s phony, let me put a headlock on you and squeeze ‘till your eyeballs pop out of your head.’" Then you can say, "I left in a hurry, Ernie Ladd still staring hard at me." But, you know, word it in your own way. (5F)
> Rubin’s next sentence, "No need, your way is perfect, Ern.”

It seemed that no matter how big wrestling became, journalists used it as a vehicle to bone up on their sarcasm. Writers poked fun at both the wrestlers’ personas and the fans who bought tickets. Many found it hard to believe that more than 30 million people a year would plop down their money to attend pro wrestling matches. They couldn’t understand what made it so popular, even

when Gordon explained it to them. They couldn't understand how Gordon could look into a camera with a straight face during an interview with pro wrestlers. They couldn't understand why Gordon was so popular and his fame was spreading.

Some of the criticism was simple hypocrisy. Many people denied they even watched pro wrestling, or tossed out the standard insult: "That's so fake." Gordon spoke about the striking difference in the polls in regard to the popularity of televised professional wrestling. A survey in one geographic area revealed that over one million people watched pro wrestling on television. By electronically monitoring the channels/programs actually in use in the exact same area, the number jumped to more than two million. Those figures demonstrated the fact that 50 percent of the people who watched pro wrestling in that area at the time refused to admit they did so.

That didn't stop many of them from calling Gordon to ask if he would help raise money for

their favorite charity. Most of the time, if he could, he did. Gordon also sought out worthy causes of his own. He and Mr. Wrestling II were pictured together in the Southside Sun and the Clayton Henry Sun in regard to their efforts to support the MISD (Muscular Injuries and Skeletal Disease) Foundation. In April 1980, the South Fulton Neighbor published a photo of Margaret Brady, president of MISD, and one of the board members, Gordon Solie. The monies brought in by Gordon and the grapplers went to the MISD Chorale and Symphony, a musical group composed of physically limited people.

The next benefit for Gordon and the wrestlers was scheduled to take place on April 13, 1980 at Al Lopez Field in Tampa. "Gordon seemed to have a knack for getting involved with some charity events that were a lot of fun," stated Bob Allyn. "He invited my family to attend a game between the professional wrestlers and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. Pam had another commitment, so I took our children, Kirstin and Ryan, and headed to

the ball field. I had heard Gordon announce stock car races and wrestling matches, but that was the first time I ever listened to him broadcast a softball game. He announced the game when the wrestlers were up to bat, and Mark Champion, radio play-by-play man for the Bucs, took the microphone when the football players were up. Gordon bellowed complaints through the PA system one time when Manny Fernandez was tackled by a Buccaneer on the way to second base. It was hilarious. During the game, we saw wrestlers Dusty Rhodes, Jack and Jerry Brisco, and Barry Windham, plus some well-known football players like Doug Williams and Jimmy Giles. I remained faithful and cheered for the wrestlers, and fortunately, they squeezed out a victory by two runs. Of course, before Gordon finished, he mentioned to everyone in the ball park that the scene had been set for a 'grudge rematch.' Also, the game raised $6,000 for the Town 'N Country Youth Sports Association."

Gordon drove into town at least five times each

week, whether it was to the office, the airport, or a charity function. Smoky stayed busy with her own activities, driving back and forth to Tampa for social events and to pursue her own career through college courses. After graduating from the University of South Florida, Smoky established herself as an artist by making pottery from a kiln at their Lake Keystone house. It wasn't long before she proved that Gordon wasn't the only accomplished Solie around Tampa. Her pottery was beautiful, and she was invited to display her work at several upscale art shows. Smoky's notoriety, however, was constantly overshadowed by Gordon's visibility on television.

In regard to Gordon's television appearances, there were hard and fast rules in CWF that nobody was to place their hands on Gordon. That rule was broken when he appeared on the CWF program and explained that he was going to air a disturbing video of "heel" manager, Sir Oliver Humperdink, and his wrestler, Don Muraco. It seems that when a camera man went back to a workout room to get

his light meter, he saw Muraco repeatedly piledriving a dummy into the ring canvas. While doing so, Muraco was yelling that he didn't want to just hurt someone … he wanted to kill someone. The camera man caught the whole thing on film and Gordon showed the footage.

After the footage aired, Humperdink charged onto the set and confronted Gordon, yelling and poking him in the chest. All Gordon could get out was, "Now just a minute, sir," before Humperdink grabbed Gordon and pushed him into the curtains on the set.

No doubt, the "unbreakable" rule had been broken in order to generate interest in a product that was declining in popularity. With the company finances in such turmoil, something unexpected had to be done in order to turn things around. The incident did spark interest for a short time and fans wrote many letters to express their outrage at the actions by Humperdink.

That was only one of the many incidents that upset fans when it came to Sir Oliver Humperdink and his evil deeds. Journalist Alex Marvez, recalled a match when Humperdink was managing Scott Irwin, who was wrestling under a mask as The Super Destroyer. “Thanks to my late father, Albert, I was able to attend wrestling matches at the Miami Beach Convention Center growing up in the 1970s. We were sold on going to the shows through Gordon’s pitches and interviews with performers. I’ll never forget how Gordon’s selling on two angles helped get them over. The first was around 1980 when the Super Destroyer ground a cigar into the ‘eye’ of ‘Mr. Florida’ (a masked Paul Jones). I remember being so scared that Mr. Florida was blinded that I called the local television affiliate in Miami (WCIX-6) asking for an update. It was Gordon’s call that hooked me. The same for the time when Kendo Nagasaki blew the dreaded ‘green mist’ into the eyes of Eddie Graham and stomped a mud hole into him inside the ring. The angle was considered hardcore by standards of the time, with Gordon even leaving

the announcing booth to travel in the ambulance with Graham to a 'local hospital.' If it were an announcer with a more tongue-in-cheek style, like the late Ed Whalen in Calgary, the angle wouldn't have been nearly as effective. When I grew up in Florida, everyone knew about Gordon Solie. Even non-wrestling fans would smile when his name was brought up."

In order to promote other types of events such as boxing, horse shows, or rock concerts, Eddie Graham, Tom Smith (a Tampa attorney who was a friend of Graham), and other investors bought the Orlando Sports Stadium. The name of the building was changed to the "Eddie Graham Sports Complex" and the investment group recruited Gordon to act as promotions director. Weekly Sunday night wrestling cards continued without interruption when the Sports Complex opened on May 11, 1980, but Gordon planned to add other events as time went on. Eddie told the staff of The Wrestling Exchange that the sports complex fit right into his plans, especially since he had retired

from the ring. He wanted to spend more time with the Florida Sheriffs Youth Ranch, more time with amateur wrestling, and be available to help get the newly acquired complex off and running. It was an opportunity for Graham to leave a physically grueling sport while he was still healthy and able to enjoy his pastimes.

From July 17 to July 20, 1980, Gordon joined the festivities at the Wrestling Fans International Association's 13th Annual Convention. Along with meetings, guest speakers, an auction, photo sessions, and autograph sessions, wrestling matches were offered three nights in a row: Thursday in Rome, Georgia, Friday at Atlanta's Omni, and Saturday in Griffin, Georgia.

Shortly after the convention, Jim Barnett sent Gordon a copy of a contract, which had been drafted on July 21, 1980, for his evaluation. The Satellite Program Network [SPN], a division of Satellite Syndicated Systems, Inc., sent a letter verifying an agreement for Jim Barnett to supply

SPN with one episode of Championship Wrestling every week for four months for distribution to affiliated cable systems. Barnett said he would sign off on the deal if Gordon agreed with the terms.

Gordon had seen pro wrestling distributed through television syndication in his early days, then through cable networks, and finally via satellite. However, the growing popularity of pro wrestling continued to generate concerns about violence, and different areas of the United States formulated plans for dealing with the issue. In the state of New Mexico, the athletic commission issued a pamphlet titled Special New Rules for Wrestling on August 1, 1980. The new rules were applicable to anyone licensed as a wrestler, a wrestling manager, a wrestling promoter, or a wrestling matchmaker. A second publication was titled Wrestling Programs Are Not Contests, and specified that professional wrestling matches could only be "advertised or announced as exhibitions." Further, all "exhibitions" had to end

“with one fall or by two out of three falls, unless otherwise approved by the commission." There also was a stipulation requiring every match to have a time limit and to be approved by the commission at least five days before the exhibition. The list of new rules was incredible. There were regulations for scoring the exhibitions, the number of exhibitions, the times for exhibitions, the correct way for contracts to be signed, tactics forbidden to wrestlers, and conduct of wrestlers’ aides. Those were the rules up to number 12. In all, there were 34 regulations on the new list.

Fortunately for CWF, no government agency placed restrictions on its wrestling cards. In fact, CWF expected such a large crowd for an event called the "Last Tangle in Tampa" that the company booked Tampa Stadium for the August 3, 1980 show.

Harley Race won the "Tangle" and held onto the NWA world heavyweight title by winning two straight pinfalls over Dusty. Bob Backlund was

just as stingy with the WWWF title belt when he defeated the "Magnificent" Muraco, and Andre the Giant was victorious over Ernie Ladd in the "Battle of the Giants." The list of talent included Mike Graham, Les Thornton, Wendi Richter, Super Destroyer, Mr. Florida (Paul Jones), Jerry Brisco, Lord Alfred Hayes, Dick Slater, Barry Windham, and Ivan Koloff.

Many of the 18,000 fans were upset because the world title match was just another "Dusty loses to Harley match." The show, and that match in particular, generated a tremendous amount of interest … most of it negative. The next morning, in the Tampa Tribune, Larry Hamel wrote:

> C'mon, Dusty, when are you going to change the script?
> This one's getting old, you know. After the weeks of hype, all the verbiage, all the wild gestures, I expected something more than the same dreary story line. This was supposed to be it.

The Last Tangle in Tampa.
Your night of nights.
The match in which the American Dream, Dusty Rhodes, would finally claim his revenge on Harley Race.
Because of the buildup ... in light of all the bally-hoo ... I thought this one would be different. But, on this night of nights, I was one of 18,000 people you sucker punched.
The only surprise was that there was no surprise.
We were promised a title and, as usual, got a dud.
The ending was the same, just another soap opera chapter in a script we've seen rerun a thousand times.
Please, Dusty, give us a break!
What's next in this choreographed struggle of good vs. evil, right
vs. wrong?
Son of Last Tangle? Last Tangle in Tampa II? Last Tangle Strikes Back?
How long do you think you and Harley can

keep this farce going?
Why even your most loyal fans are getting restless. Your blind followers are seeing the light.
Did you hear them, Dusty? Sunday night, they were screaming "Ripoff! Ripoff!"
Dusty, they're catching on. Your faithful crew is contemplating mutiny.
Race vs. Rhodes is wearing thin. The act is getting old. Could it be, Dusty, that the public isn't as gullible as your promoters believe? ("18,000 pro")

One section of the article, in which the writer was addressing the fans directly, he wrote: "And, like me, you marvel at the way Gordon Solie can keep a straight face."

To close the article, Hamel wrote:

Following the Last Tangle, Rhodes told the Tampa Tribune, "I will never again wrestle Harley Race. There will be another champion

before I wrestle for the title."
Unless my memory fails me, didn't we hear a similar spiel a few months ago? Apparently, the Dream's promises last as long as a Muhammad Ali retirement.
So you can bet when the promoters deem the time is ripe for another financial killing, Dusty will conveniently forget that somber pledge.
Then the film will roll on Race vs. Rhodes ... Take 4,522. ("18,000 pro")

One of the ladies present, Doreen Cavanaugh, was a reporter with a start-up magazine called The Wrestling Exchange. She was seeking Gordon's help to gain ringside access to the regular CWF venues, and had aspirations of becoming well-known in the business like writer/editor Bill Apter. Doreen's request was just one of many which crossed Gordon's desk on a regular basis.

Gordon was well aware that CWF raised money for more than just Florida charities. Jim Barnett

directed a lot of money from CWF to support the arts, particularly in the Atlanta area.

Barnett got his start in the wrestling business in Chicago, when wrestling was televised nationally on the old Dumont Network. Credited as the person who originated the idea of taping wrestling at a TV studio and syndicating the shows, Barnett promoted wrestling in Detroit, Indianapolis, Australia, Georgia, and Florida. He eventually became one of the most powerful promoters in the history of the wrestling business, buying controlling interest in Georgia Championship Wrestling and Southeastern Wrestling Corporation, based out of Knoxville. For five years, he also was the majority owner of the Florida wrestling promotion, although that fact was not advertised to the general public. Barnett gave big donations to organizations like the Georgia Council for the Arts and the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. In 1979, President Jimmy Carter appointed Barnett as an advisor to the National Council for the Arts. The arts, or for that matter, cultural events in general,

were a common interest to Barnett and Gordon. In fact, Gordon's broad spectrums of interests were described by writer Mark Jackson like this:

> Aside from wrestling, a conversation with Gordon Solie is likely to range from the progression of Schopenhauer's ideology through Nietzsche's "Thus Spoke Zarathustra" and Hitler's "Mein Kampf" to Cubinism as contrasted with Realism concentrating on the works of Pablo Picasso. Mr. Solie's cultural awareness enhances his telecasts since the man at the helm has a wider world than that which the regular sportscaster holds. ("Solie Interview")

The same "cultural awareness" applied to Gordon when it came to music. He enjoyed a wide variety of performers, whether it was an opera by Pavarotti, the harmony of the Irish Tenors, the guitar playing of Eric Clapton, or the country-western sounds of Johnny Cash, Patsy Cline and Willie Nelson. Gordon was a big fan of Willie

Nelson, and said he was overwhelmed when they actually met because Willie expressed that he, in turn, "was a fan of Gordon Solie."

His diet was another example of Gordon's affluent upbringing. He was very capable of ordering an exquisite entrée in an upscale restaurant and communicating with the establishment on exactly how to prepare the food. Although Gordon might stop for a cup of coffee, he didn't eat at fast food restaurants.

At work, Gordon was concerned about a correspondence that was passed on to him. On October 24, 1980, Jim Barnett sent a letter to Eddie Graham regarding the Championship Wrestling from Florida bank account.

> As you know, we have been receiving constant notices from the Flagship Bank about being overdrawn in the Championship Wrestling from Florida account. We are also holding a number of large bills that need to be

paid.
At present, our cash position shows us to be about $70,000 overdrawn. This amount includes paying the necessary bills we are holding, but does not include the monthly expense checks due to each stockholder on or about October 1, 1980.
I would like to suggest the following measures be taken immediately:
a. Stockholders put in their percentage of the $70,000 we are overdrawn. This should be done no later than Thursday October 30th.
b. All weekly and monthly salaries to stockholders be suspended until the cash flow improves. Salaries and monthly expense checks will not be terminated, but held in abeyance pending a more positive cash position.
c. All newspaper advertising be cut by 40%.
d. All paid radio advertising be terminated. If we need radio spots, I am sure a barter deal for tickets can be worked out with the radio stations.

e. The number of wrestlers on each show be reduced to 18 men plus manager and referee. If at the end of the week a wrestler hasn't worked enough to make the $300 guarantee, we will make it up to him.
When we reach a stronger financial position, the stockholder loans can be repaid and the weekly and monthly salaries can be reinstated.
The worst kind of reputation a company can get with a bank is to be constantly overdrawn. The Flagship Bank loaned CWF $120,000 eight months ago, and I would not like them calling the loan in early because of habitual overdrafts.

Banking problems within CWF didn't change Gordon's busy schedule. On November 10, 1980, he helped the NCAA National Soccer Championship by booking Dusty to appear at their opening day, half-time ceremonies. During the same month, Gordon appeared at the 1980 Gulf Ridge Council Boy Scouts' show where 12,000

people showed up for the activities. Later in the year, Gordon headed to Columbus, Ohio, for a GCW card at the Ohio Center on December 28. GCW was expanding its house shows to cities outside of Georgia, and on inaugural shows, featured "special guest announcer Gordon Solie" in the advertisements.

One of Gordon's fans from Dryden, Ontario wrote saying he had been a devoted follower of Georgia Championship Wrestling for three years, but there was one change he wanted to see on the program. He thought the company needed to match better competition against the Andersons and the Freebirds because their opponents were "kids." His suggestion to Gordon was to let John Studd or Lou Albano manage the Moondogs against the Freebirds in a steel cage match.

That same year, Gordon had the opportunity to work again with a man named Jim Dillon. As a competitor back in 1975, Dillon held the Florida tag team title with fellow grappler Roger Kirby.

Jim returned to Florida in 1980 as a manager named J.J. Dillon, and saw Gordon at the wrestling office daily. "One of the things the average fan did not know," said J.J., "was how important Gordon was to the successful advertising for Championship Wrestling from Florida. Gordon did the layouts for all the ads and that was critical to our success. In addition, Gordon was the best announcer in the history of professional wrestling. He was so smooth, and put the business and the wrestlers over, but not himself."

On January 15, 1981, Gordon worked as a committee discussion leader for the Suncoast Chapter of the Leukemia Society. He was planning a fund raiser with some of his friends and fellow committee members: Senator Malcolm Beard, Ed Blackburn, Logan Browning, Johnny Fernandez, Dick Greco, Sheriff Walter Heinrick, Father Higgins, Judge Hinson, Tom McEwen, and Art Pepin. The name of the fundraiser was the "Eddie Graham Happy Birthday Roast" and it was scheduled to be held at the Egypt Shrine Temple in

Tampa.

It would be an enjoyable way to make money for a good cause and an evening away from some of the problems that were facing CWF. Attendance was down in Jacksonville, one of their major cities, and promoter Don Curtis had broken away with Louis Tillet to promote wrestling cards in direct competition to CWF for a company called Sun Belt Wrestling. Greg Larson, a Times-Union sportswriter, noted that crowd size at Jacksonville pro wrestling matches had dropped down to around 3,000 patrons. Since CWF had exclusive rights to wrestling shows at the Coliseum, Curtis said he would begin with cards on the west side of Jacksonville. He said that was where most of the wrestling fans lived, anyway, and televised broadcasts in Jacksonville would be available for fans who lived farther away.

CWF filed suit in March, claiming that Tillet was in violation of a non-compete clause with CWF. The Times-Union added more coverage of

the suit in its "Briefs" on March 19, 1981. CWF's attorney, Thomas Smith, alleged in the suit that Tillet was bound by a five-year contract going back to 1976, and that contract had not yet expired. It was CWF's contention that Curtis was aware of Tillet's non-compete agreement and that he conspired with Tillet to break the previous agreement. With that in mind, Thomas also charged Curtis and Tillet with being partners in Sunbelt Wrestling, and as such, were illegally competing against CWF. Thomas asked for damages of $5,000, plus the same in punitive damages, and he wanted an injunction to shut down Sun Belt and stop them from competing. In response to the Times-Union article about the suit, Robert S. Devins, General Counsel for Sun Belt Wrestling, Ltd., placed a statement in the newspaper which read as follows:

> Wrestling with problem
> Sirs:
> I have been requested by my client, Sun Belt Wrestling, Ltd., to contact you in regard to the

column of March 19 in "Briefs." I appreciate your accurate rendition of the complaint filed. Also, I would like to advise you of some vital and salient features with regard to Sun Belt:
*Sun Belt Wrestling, Ltd. is a Georgia Corporation.
*Sun Belt Wrestling, Ltd. is registered to conduct business in Florida as a corporation.
*Mr. Curtis and Mr. Tillet are not partners doing business as Sun Belt; indeed, Mr. Curtis and Mr. Tillet are not even shareholders of Sun Belt Wrestling, Ltd.
*The injunctive relief sought by the action of Championship Wrestling group from Florida would cause irreparable harm only to the citizens of Jacksonville, who would be denied a choice in the quality and nature of wrestling promotions.
*Sun Belt Wrestling, Ltd. is contemplating appropriate legal action with Championship Wrestling from Florida, with particular emphasis on anti-trust aspect of their conduct.

Don Curtis' wife, Dotty, said the suit was idiotic and the NWA was only worried that somebody else might put on a better show. Either way, it was evident that CWF intended to protect its exclusivity in Florida arenas and stifle any competition that might threaten its television program.

Even though Gordon was concerned about the financial and legal challenges facing CWF, it wasn't really his part of the business. He concentrated on the announcing, the publicity and the production end of the business. One of the most important parts of the show for Gordon were the credits at the end of Championship Wrestling from Florida which always included an acknowledgement for Fairchilds, the clothing store which provided his attire. Fairchild's was owned by Gordon's long-time friend, George Spoto, and that sponsorship was the reason why Gordon had a walk-in closet full of fashionable suits. Gordon's broadcasting outfit usually included three or four expensive diamond rings, as well. Bob Allyn

remembers watching the replays of CWF at Gordon's house: "When Gordon and I watched the show, he always insisted on complete silence and didn't want anyone to disturb him when the credits rolled. I understood his concern, but I still got a kick out of watching Gordon the first time I ever saw him watch the CWF credits. He actually moved in his seat so he was closer to the TV, and would lean forward intently, checking to be sure the credit for Fairchild's Clothing was included. It wasn't all about business; Gordon genuinely wanted to make sure that his friend, George, or 'Georgio' as I knew him, was taken care of appropriately."

Championship Wrestling from Florida definitely made an impact in regional television, but Georgia Championship Wrestling became the place for wrestlers to get exposure to a nationwide audience. Jimmy Snuka remembered wrestling for GCW and capturing the National tag team title with Terry Gordy. He also remembered the man behind the microphone: "Gordon was a genius. When the

bell rang, he was prime-time, and when he spoke, everybody needed to listen because the man knew what he was talking about. When we did interviews with Gordon, he would start off by praising us. That mellowed us out right from the start, and then he knew how to put us in a position to say the right things. I remember staring Gordon down in an interview, and he responded with, 'I don't know what Jimmy Snuka is up to. He doesn't say much, but when he gets in the ring, it's a different story.' Outside the ring, Gordon was very spiritual, very calm, and a great teacher. He inspired us to do our best."

In August 1981, Gordon did special promos for episodes of Georgia Championship Wrestling which would air in Australia, and conducted interviews with Terry Gordy, Tommy Rich, Jimmy Snuka, and the Masked Superstar.

Gordon's name popped up in a variety of publications, including one called the "Monroe Doctrine," a newsletter published on November

13, 1981, by Monroe Junior High in Tampa. The author of the column, Jennifer Bellotts, mentioned that one of Gordon's idols was the poet, Omar Khayyam. The young lady also pointed out that Gordon had just received an award for his devotion to raising money for the Big Brothers and Big Sisters organization. The article was well written and even impressed her school principal, Ken Vennett. Ken was a friend of Gordon, and the same man who had defended Gordon and the wrestlers in the press years before.

Other friends and fans interacted with Gordon when he was a guest on local radio talk shows. One listener called WFLA Radio and said he remembered a match where Gordon did a remarkable job on the play-by-play. During the match, the Great Malenko wrestled a new mattress and lost.

In issue number nine of Whatever Happened to …?, Scott Teal shared his memories of the commercial:

There are so many great moments in Malenko's career that I personally remember, but none as well as a humorous incident that took place in the early '70s. One afternoon, as the Championship Wrestling from Florida program faded to a commercial break, the picture changed to Malenko in the ring. He charged across the ring to meet his opponent … a queen-size mattress. In an attempt to defeat his stuffed opponent, he body-slammed it. He stomped on it and punched it. But his efforts were all to no avail. The mattress was too comfortable. Malenko fell over backwards and fell asleep on the mattress. "One, two, three" and the match was over. It was a classic moment that showed me a lighter side of Malenko that I never knew existed. (10)

Gordon laughed and said he remembered doing the announcing, and that it was a commercial for Babcock Furniture Company. The WFLA program host, Paul Gonzales, broke in and asked Gordon,

"You stooped so low as to do a mattress commercial?" Gordon's response was simple, "Hey, they paid money."

When Championship Wrestling from Florida disappeared from Channel 51 in Fort Lauderdale, fans of all ages contacted the station to voice their disapproval. Instead of CWF, the station was airing matches from a promotion called International Championship Wrestling, which was advertising an upcoming match between Ernie Ladd and Crusher Bloomfield. Gordon was always aware of the independents in Florida, but never really felt threatened because Tampa wrestling had been such a strong presence in the industry.

That was changing, however, because Georgia Championship Wrestling had emerged as the showcase for the NWA, and they had something that CWF didn't have: airtime on Ted Turner's WTBS network. In December 1981, a two-page layout written by Lee Beasley appeared in the Atlanta Weekly. Titled "The Grapplers' Game,"

the subtitle read "Sure, it's a sham. But who cares? Not the fans. And certainly not Gordon Solie, TV's ringside veteran". Beasley wrote, "Each week, Channel 17 broadcasts three hours of Georgia Championship Wrestling to cable affiliates across the country. With a viewing audience of more than 10 million, it is one of the station's most popular shows" (44). Gordon clearly reached a pinnacle of success; he had gone from hosting one of America's very successful regional TV programs with CWF to the announcer for the number one show on the largest cable network in America.

In early 1981, Gordon sent his resume to Daniel Pecaro, president of WGN Continental Broadcasting in Chicago. The letter was on the "QT" and offered Gordon's experience and fresh communication ideas through Gordon Solie Enterprises, Inc. In describing his own personality on the resume, Gordon wrote, "Special communicative abilities have inspired millions of followers … subject of feature articles, including the New York Times papers … recipient of

several top-flight awards.”

By late 1981, another CWF performer was making her presence known. Barbara Clary, an attractive, 24-year-old brunette, was added to the show. The credit for Barbara’s discovery went to Gordon. Barbara was attending acting classes at the University of South Florida, and met Gordon at the advertising agency where she worked. When he learned of her acting and singing talents, Gordon arranged for Clary to try out for CWF. She began to work for CWF and quickly became very popular. One of her first assignments was to conduct an interview segment called "Take Five with Barbara Clary." Gordon claimed that the reaction to a regular female host on the show was very good. The fact that Barbara was bilingual was a bonus since Spanish-speaking countries like South America, Puerto Rico, and parts of Miami had a large viewing audience.

When it came to requests from charity and fund-raising organizations seeking his help, Gordon

continued to fulfill as many requests as possible. One he mentioned often was a letter from a lady who stood at shopping malls and raised money for a new organization called S.O.U.P., which was an abbreviation for "Sterilization of Unwanted Pets." If someone didn't have the money to neuter their pet, she tried to raise the money to pay the difference. All she wanted from Gordon was a wrestler to stand with her at a mall for a couple of hours while she raised money for the organization.

United Cerebral Palsy (UCP) of Central Florida, Inc. requested assistance from Gordon for the telethon it had planned for January 17, 1982. On the January 10 preview for the telethon, the UCP Board presented an award to Gordon and Mike Graham. After the Weekend with the Stars Telethon was over, Gordon received an enthusiastic letter of thanks from Nadine Ziglar, the executive director of UCP in Tampa. By January 20, the telethon had already beaten the previous year by 25 percent, and had the largest increase that year of any UCP telethon in the Sunshine State.

Not long after that, Gordon received a thank you letter from the PARC Center Apartments (PARC being Pinellas Association for Retarded Children). A couple of months earlier, Gordon had received an invitation from Phil Smith, a resident at the center. Gordon accepted, and he and Smoky attended a Thanksgiving dinner with Phil and the other residents. In return, Gordon treated Phil and some of Phil's friends to ringside seats at the CWF wrestling matches.

About the same time, Gordon received confirmation from Jim Barnett that Freddie Miller had resigned and would no longer be associated with GCW after February 11, 1982. Doug Smith, the old office manager also was gone, so inquiries were directed to Barnett or his business manager, Bobby Simmons. The day after Freddie's official tenure ended, Gordon was pictured in the Tampa Tribune-Times with Mr. Wrestling II and some folks from the Tampa Bay Buccaneers to publicize a grudge rematch game between the grapplers and footballers.

With all the crazy changes going around in the wrestling industry, one thing remained constant. Whenever possible, Gordon could still be found consuming what he called his "liquid lunch" at Malio's in Tampa. The restaurant had an entrance on each end of the building — one for the general public and one for private club members. Gordon was considered one of the celebrities seen at the restaurant, along with the likes of Buccaneer coach John McKay and baseball legends Tommy Lasorda and Johnny Bench. Gordon mentioned that while dining in the club side, he occasionally spoke with New York Yankees owner George Steinbrenner, and had even visited there with the shopping mall king, Eddie DeBartolo, Sr.. Good food, plenty of Vodka, interesting conversation, and opportunities for business deals made it the perfect hangout for Gordon.

On April 20, 1982, HRS District VI Volunteer Services presented an award to Gordon and CWF. He also manned the mike alongside Mark Champion on April 26, 1982 and called the action

for the charity softball rematch between the wrestlers and the Bucs. The new football recruits were overpowering as Scott Brantley homered and the Bucs whipped up on the wrestlers by a score of 10-1. Gordon also lined up wrestlers for the Spina Bifida dance and jamboree at Fort Hesterly Armory on May 8 and 9, and continued his efforts with Lil' Kids Publishing Co. The Lil' Kids program, geared to improving reading skills of elementary students, was part of the "Reading is Fundamental Program." In some of the books, Gordon included short bios and fitness tips from wrestlers like Jack and Jerry Brisco.

Always anxious to delve into new ventures, Gordon became an Amway distributor and started a firm named Solie Audio Video, Inc., a throwback to his early days in Plant City. The new audio/video business was set up to tape wills, depositions, weddings, real estate for sale, etc. One of his fans had earlier written to Freddie Miller about another new venture, but since he was gone from GCW, she wanted to know if Gordon

would be interested in her wrestling coloring book. Included with the outline drawings of wrestlers in her book were quite a few of Gordon.

Back on the television set, Gordon was involved in one of Georgia Championship Wrestling's most talked-about segments when he was knocked down by "bad guy" Don Muraco. Roddy Piper entered the fray, saved the day, and instantly changed his persona from a "heel" to a "babyface." The incident was replayed on the popular television show, Entertainment Tonight, along with other current topics, such as Dustin Hoffman's role in the movie Tootsie, and a new movie involving Charlton Heston and his son, Frazier. Tributes were also paid to actress Ingrid Bergman, after which the attention turned to World Championship Wrestling [WCW].

As Georgia Championship Wrestling continued to expand to other states outside of Georgia, the name of the television show had changed to World Championship Wrestling. The program included

new wrestling titles, a new logo, and a new set.

Entertainment Tonight described World Championship Wrestling as the "highest rated show on the ‘Superstation,’ WTBS, in Atlanta." Gordon was depicted as the "Walter Cronkite of professional wrestling," and a man who "knew the art of the understatement." “Wrestling is a natural for television," said Gordon, because viewers can "sit in their living rooms and watch great athletes" (“Georgia Wrestling”).

One of the wrestlers Gordon worked with during the transition was Larry Zbyszko. Larry first met Gordon in the Georgia territory back in the mid-seventies, and then returned in 1981. "I was familiar to the WWWF fans after being trained by Bruno Sammartino, and I spent a few years there early my career," said Larry. "In those days, it wasn’t uncommon, though, to take a year or so off from a territory. We didn’t want the fans to get tired of us, and after a break, we’d come back for a fresh start. When I went to Georgia, it was a fun

territory to work in. I'd be home every night, instead of driving my tail off like I did elsewhere. It was a good place to raise a family. After my feuding days with Bruno in the WWWF, I returned to Georgia in 1981. Gordon Solie was the announcer there and he was a very likeable person. He communicated with the wrestlers just like he was one of the guys. I left within a couple of years because things had changed. It was no longer a small territory. It just got too big."

During the same time period, Jim Barnett sent a letter to the work force of Georgia Championship Wrestling.

> To all Georgia Championship Wrestling Employees:
> As of this date, all references to people, wrestlers, towns, and promoters that are not directly involved with a Georgia Championship Wrestling promotion are not to be used on our television show. We are not interested in naming fans, councilmen, or

activities of wrestlers outside of our promotional area.

Part of the directive was Gordon's fault for adding a few comments unrelated to the wrestling show during a program. Gordon and Smoky had scheduled a trip to Hawaii and planned to spend some time there with Freddie Miller, and his wife, Cookie. Gordon had yet to meet Cookie, but he sent her a greeting, anyway, by saying hello to her between segments on Georgia Championship Wrestling.

In late June 1982, news came to Gordon that set him back a bit. A new wrestling group called the IWWA had started up in Tampa and the promoter, Keith Lancaster, claimed to have already made TV contacts with a local station. The surprise was the fact that Lancaster's booker was none other than Larry Simon, aka the Great Malenko. The IWWA told Frank Klein of the Tampa Times that they had already filmed four shows, but hadn't booked any live shows due to the tremendous increase in arena

and wrestlers' fees.

Scott Teal wrote about the reasons behind Malenko's split with Eddie Graham and Championship Wrestling from Florida in issue nine of Whatever Happened to …?:

> In 1974, after returning from a run in the Carolinas, Malenko was booked to wrestle at the Armory in Tampa. His return that night sparked life back into the promotion and the Armory sold out — just like old times. At the end of the evening, Eddie Graham handed Malenko a check for $100. The payoff was a slap in the face to Malenko and marked the beginning of the end of a business relationship between Graham and Malenko that had lasted more than a decade — a relationship that had netted Graham millions of dollars.
> Graham told everyone that he fired Malenko that night, claiming an impropriety on Malenko's part involving an airplane ticket. The boys working in the territory disclosed a

different scenario: that Graham was resentful of Malenko's popularity with the fans, while Graham's own star was just as quickly fading. Graham, a powerful player with the National Wrestling Alliance, had Malenko blacklisted. Malenko's reaction was to hit Graham where it hurt the most, in his pocketbook. He formed his own promotion and began to run opposition. He filmed his television at Channel 3 in Tampa, the PBS affiliate, and aired the show on Channel 28, an independent station that is now an NBC affiliate. It wasn't long before Graham was calling Malenko, trying to smooth things over, and wanting to know what it would take to get him off the air … but Malenko wasn't about to back down. Announcers on Graham's Championship Wrestling from Florida program began making on-the-air remarks, criticizing Malenko and his promotion. Dusty Rhodes, who was Graham's top draw during that time, got cute during one of his interviews and began to ridicule the boys that Malenko had

working for him. Malenko responded on-the-air by challenging Rhodes to a match with all proceeds going to charity. In addition, Malenko's sons, Joe and Dean, were just beginning their pro careers. Having learned the art of shooting and hooking from Karl Gotch, they issued challenges of their own to Eddie and Mike Graham. For some reason, "Graham and Co." suddenly refused to comment on the subject. (9)

While waiting to see how the new promotion developed, the wrestlers again donned their softball uniforms and took on Tampa's pro soccer team, the Rowdies. In a letter dated August 3, 1982, Gordon Jago of the Rowdies thanked Solie for the fundraiser and the great time the Rowdies had at the Armory wrestling matches.

Gordon was amazed at the spin-offs which came from the industry's success. One example was a course offered at Mississippi Community College titled "How to Enjoy TV Wrestling." The man who

created the course, Tim McLain, was interviewed by Ron Maxey from The Commercial Appeal Northeast Ark. Bureau. McLain said there must be something to it (pro wrestling) because the Mid-South Coliseum in Memphis was full of fans every Monday night. The course catalogue described its content as the "sociological, psychological and athletic aspects of pro wrestling."

By request, Gordon went over a rather elaborate agreement between Tomwil, Inc. of Los Angeles and Global Wrestling in Atlanta. The six-page contract, drafted on September 20, 1982, originally was sent to Ann Gunkel. The agreement set the terms for Tomwil to acquire "Distribution Agreements" for planned one-hour wrestling programs produced by Global Wrestling, a company owned by Gunkel. Gordon seemed to be a good sounding board for wrestling promotion executives when it came to contract negotiations. Besides seeking Gordon's advice, Ann planned to have Gordon involved as a broadcaster for the Global wrestling shows. If Ann decided to accept

the contract, then Tomwil would receive distribution rights for Global Wrestling everywhere in the world excluding the United States and Latin America.

The next week, Gordon paid a visit to Oakhurst Elementary School in Seminole, Florida, and he brought two wrestlers with him — Terry Allen, who later became famous as wrestler "Magnum TA", and Scott McGhee [Garfield "Gary" Portz], son of internationally-famous wrestler Geoff Portz. The three men visited two classrooms attended by Gordon's grandchildren, Kirstin and Ryan Allyn. Terry spoke about his experiences in sports as a youth in the United States, and in contrast, Scott told the students what it was like for young athletes in Ireland. Kirstin's fourth-grade classmates were excited and had a lot of questions for the three visitors. It was a different story with Ryan and his classmates. After introducing the wrestlers, Gordon asked if there were any questions. The tiny first graders, looking up in awe at Terry and Scott, simply froze with wide-eyed, frightened looks.

They were overwhelmed. It took several minutes, but the teacher and the guests finally got the first-graders to loosen up a bit.

Another grappler that Gordon worked with was Ivan Koloff, often referred to as the "Russian Bear." He spoke about Gordon's abilities: "Gordon had a unique way of projecting his voice while on camera. He knew the name of every wrestling hold, and it was obvious to anyone listening that Gordon was the best. We came in early on Saturday mornings for multiple interviews, and we weren't always bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. Gordon led the way with a build-up of details about a previous or upcoming match, and then we knew what to talk about. If we got stuck, he would pick us up. If anyone knows what Ric Flair means to professional wrestlers, then they can understand what Gordon Solie means to professional wrestling announcers. When we were working, however, we didn't think of Gordon as the announcer. We just thought of him as one of the guys."

"I remember one segment," continued Ivan, "where Gordon again demonstrated his ability to entertain the fans by setting the stage for a match. I think it was Ole Anderson who was partnered with me for a tag team match, and we were the heels. Ole and I were veteran 'bad guys' and the fans were used to the fact that nothing bothered us. We were going up against some 'face' [babyface, or good-guy] and a mystery tag team partner. After quite a buildup, Gordon looked at me and said, 'Would you like to meet your opponent?' Gordon turned and pulled a blanket off a cage, and inside was Mad Dog Vachon, who was growling, screaming, and violently shaking the bars. Everyone jumped back at that moment. Gordon turned to speak into the camera and said something like, 'You cannot see it because Ivan Koloff's back is toward you, but I can guarantee you that I saw fear on this man's face.'"

"And for a small man, Gordon could hit very hard," added Ivan. "We were out having some drinks one night with Johnny Valentine. Gordon

was dealing with a bad leg and Johnny was confined to a wheelchair. Johnny bet Gordon that he could win in a slapping contest. It was agreed that Gordon would go first, and knowing how wild and crazy Johnny could get, Gordon decided to get in a good shot. You could hear the smack all over the bar as Gordon practically knocked Johnny out of the wheelchair. Then Johnny slapped Gordon so hard that Gordon had to hang on in order to stay in his chair. They had a drink in between rounds and proceeded to sting each other five or six times. I think Johnny knocked Gordon out of his chair at least once. Then they went back to talking and drinking like nothing happened."

Abdullah the Butcher also wrestled for Georgia Championship Wrestling, and shared some memories of Gordon: "He consistently joked around, but when the cameras started rolling for TV, Gordon was always serious. Everyone was treated the same. Gordon spoke with us before interviews whenever possible and tried to help us look good on camera. If we got into trouble during

an interview, he would feed us information and smooth things out. He was a great speaker and a hell of an interview man."

"He caught me off guard one time," said Abdullah, "when I brought out a light bulb and started chewing on it. Gordon made some crack like, 'He's got to be nuts to be eating glass.' Well, he made me laugh and I swallowed some of the glass. I had to run off the set to take care of myself. Another time, I brought out some nasty fish and started chewing on it. Gordon said, 'Holy sh–. He's eating raw fish.' Of course, those comments were never heard by the TV audience."

Although business was great at the time, not everyone was cheering for professional wrestling. Lias B. Steen, commissioner of the Texas Department of Labor and Standards, decided to make some big changes throughout the state in regards to pro wrestling matches. While some other states were actually deregulating pro wrestling, Steen pushed a bill through to ban any

wrestling outside the ring, and he wanted to suspend any wrestler who hurt an opponent by using a foreign object. So much for chairs, tables, clubs, and belts.

Steen wanted to see rules followed, but he admitted that deregulation would relieve his office of any concerns for the grapplers. According to Bryan Burrough's at Wall Street Journal, William Arnold and Joe Blanchard were two opponents of the new rules and informed Steen that he would be looking at some lawsuits (14). The new Texas rules would deter fans from coming to the matches and put a dent in the $4,000,000 of projected wrestling revenue in the state by the end of the year. Burrough pointed out that under the new rules, Steen only had ten guys to monitor 600 matches a month. Even if they were able to attend half of them each month, that still would leave many matches without supervision by the state.

Gordon, interestingly enough, kept the 1983 NWA Official Rules of Professional Wrestling

handbook in his files. In Section I, under General Rules, it read, "Any wrestler using a non-regulation object as a weapon against his opponent is subject to immediate disqualification." Nowhere in the rule book did it say, however, what was considered to be a "regulation" object. Regardless of the state, promotion or federation, pro wrestling fans wanted to see chair shots, chain matches, brass knuckle contests, and blood.

Gordon no longer wrote regular columns for La Gaceta, but he was featured on page 16 in the newspaper's April 13, 1983 column called "Silhouettes" by Harry Russo. The article definitely was sentimental, especially since the paper was located in Ybor City, where Gordon had launched his career some 33 years before. Russo said Gordon was just as "outspoken off the tube as he was on it." Gordon expressed his concerns about "ethics in journalism," and told Russo that through a moral breakdown, the media had lost its sense of right and wrong. One of the triggers, according to Gordon, was the

deregulation of the FCC by the US government.

"Deregulation allows newspapers to editorialize on the front page without labeling it as such. Since deregulation, the media has lost much of its integrity," said Gordon. Gordon was particularly upset with staff members at local radio stations for editing recorded words of a politician and he called them "amateurs."

After a few more comments, Russo wanted to know how a man like Gordon in a "suspect sport" like wrestling could justify that kind of media criticism. As far as his role in wrestling was concerned, Gordon said, "The thousands of fans (who go to the matches each week) deserve coverage of the sport" (16). It was the success afforded Gordon by those fans and his civic-minded upbringing that pushed him to continually give back to the community.

Gordon was again asked to participate in a charity event and it turned out to be one centered

on his mid-section. He had grown a noticeable gut. Two teams of Tampa celebrities were organized to see which one could lose the most weight in the "Equal Challenge." “In April 1983, Pam and I went with Gordon and Smoky to the dinner for the final weigh-in to see which team lost the most weight," said Bob Allyn. "I think Equal was a fairly new sweetener at the time, so it was good publicity for the company and it was tied in with a charity fund raiser. Another business agreed to donate money to the American Diabetes Association (ADA) for each pound lost by the winning team. We sat at a table with Gordon and Smoky, professional football coach Abe Gibron, Milt Spencer, and Logan and Barbara Browning. Jim Smith, a popular TV meteorologist, was also there, along with Tampa City Council member Helen Chavez and some local DJ’s. Gordon shed more than ten pounds but his team lost the competition. By Gordon’s standards however, it was a win-win contest. Every member on both teams lost weight and they raised thousands of dollars for the ADA.”

In addition to his charity contributions and broadcasting duties, Gordon continued to branch out into new business ventures, but unfortunately, most of them went belly-up. At the time, he was still dealing with the aftermath of the boat show, which had taken place way back in November 1977. He and his partner had taken out a $3,000 note to help finance the deal. Since his partner, Maridon, had filed bankruptcy back in April 1983, Gordon ended up dealing with the note himself.

The May 1983 issue of Bill Denny's Sports Beat reported that Gordon picked up some more duties at the microphone. Ann Gunkel's Global Wrestling shows were off and running, and began to air on Saturdays at 4:30 p.m. and on Thursdays at one o'clock a.m. Bill Newman worked with Ann for years and described Gordon's role in the Global TV production: "Gordon hosted a couple of shows with Ann, but his primary duty was to come in after the matches and do voice-overs. It was freelance work for Gordon and convenient for him because we were based out of Atlanta. We also filmed

some matches in Valdosta. A couple of the best programs revolved around appearances when Gordon and Lou Thesz were together. If you can imagine being entertained by a couple of guys describing a specific muscle group in the human body, then you can understand how fascinating it was to listen to Gordon and Lou as they gave the viewing audience an anatomy lesson.

"I believe we ran the Global Wrestling shows for around four years," said Bill. "There were times when Gordon quit flying up to Atlanta, so we used Les Thatcher, and later on, we brought in Freddie Miller. We even went to Memphis for a joint show with Lawler and Jarrett. Ann was very creative when it came to the wrestling business. She flew to Chicago and discussed programming with WGN and also met with folks from ESPN. Around the same time, Vince McMahon was just beginning [to go nationwide] and, like Ann, he had an endless supply of ideas about the promotion of pro wrestling."

Gordon also had a new announcer beside him on the set of Championship Wrestling from Florida. Retired wrestler Buddy Colt joined Gordon for the televised matches to provide color commentary. Buddy was the pilot of an airplane that crashed in 1975, an accident which ended the life of fellow wrestler Bobby Shane, and prematurely ended Buddy's wrestling career due to serious ankle injuries. He worked part-time for CWF as a referee, but concentrated on selling real estate. "The trend in professional wrestling at the time was to have a color commentator along with the play-by-play announcer," stated Buddy.

"Eddie Graham approached me and asked me if I would be interested in the position, and I said yes. It was also a natural tie-in and good publicity for my real estate business," added Buddy, "and I had known Gordon ever since I came to Tampa in 1972. He interviewed me on many occasions, and I always appreciated the way he would pick me up if I got stuck. If I stopped speaking and hit a lull, Gordon just took over and away we went. I got

Gordon chuckling pretty hard, though, during one of our interviews. He was talking about a film clip from a match I had with Man Mountain Mike, a guy who weighed six-hundred pounds. I looked at the clip and said to Gordon, 'I had him right where I wanted him.' The funny part was that Man Mountain Mike was sitting on me at the time during that part of the match. Another unique quality about Gordon was the fact that although he was an announcer, and the best one in the business at that, he was also accepted by the wrestlers as one of the guys."

Occasionally, someone would come onto a set and try to outshine Gordon during an interview. One man came onto the set of World Championship Wrestling to do just that. He had been managing wrestlers in the Georgia Wrestling Superstars troupe and couldn't wait for his first appearance on WCW. After his wrestlers, The Angel [Frank Morrell] and the Bounty Hunter [Jerry Novak] beat up on two young wrestlers, manager Jim Cornette joined Gordon at the podium. For three minutes,

Cornette wailed and ranted like never before, and thought for sure that he'd stolen the show. Jim said Gordon turned directly to the camera, made some comments, and then said, "As far as Mr. Cornette is concerned, I'm terribly under-whelmed." With that simple statement, Gordon totally deflated Jim Cornette's tirade. Cornette never forgot that day.

Amidst his mail, Gordon received periodic wrestling letters from a gentleman named Chuck Shepherd, a man who followed wrestling and put humorous twists into his writing. Categories appeared in Shepherd's newsletters for the "best wrestlers," the "ugliest wrestlers," the "worst wrestlers," and so on. In the June 15, 1983 edition of his newsletter, Shepherd included "voice removal candidates." They were Buzz Sawyer, Jimmy Valiant, and Tommy Rich (1). Shepherd would later find fame as the author of a nationally syndicated column called "News of the Weird," which appears in many mainstream newspapers.

Along with Shepherd's correspondence,

Gordon's files included a letter which reminded him, again, that he was not flawless when speaking at the microphone: "On a number of occasions, you have referred to the fact that the human (adults) spine has 33 vertebral segments. As a current chiropractic student, I can assure you that only 26 segments are present in the adults. In the infant, 33 segments exist due to the incomplete fusion of the sacrum and coccyx."

On July 7, 1982, Pamela J. Kennedy sent Gordon a thank-you for his part in facilitating the "Bowl for KID'S Sake." More than 1,000 bowlers participated in the event which generated $45,000 for Big Brothers Big Sisters of Greater Tampa. He also was the special guest announcer for the Pinellas Park Art Museum's building fund, and had an opportunity to have lunch with Chuck Shepherd, who was in town from Washington, DC. Chuck shared one review of his newsletter with Gordon: "Chuck Shepherd is the Gordon Solie of wrestling writers. He uses words that only he and Gordon can understand."

Gordon also had lunch with Jeff Bukantz, a member of the New York Fencers and the U.S. National Fencing Team. He was the same wrestling fan who hung out with Ken Patera and Harley Race after the "Super Bowl" of Wrestling. Bukantz was in town for the 13th Annual Florida Citrus Growers Gasparilla Fencing Tournament, which aired on 190 public broadcasting stations. The men's foil crown was won by Bukantz, who also managed a visit to the Armory wrestling matches while he was in town. "I guess I was kind of ballsy when I was younger," said Jeff. "I wanted to go to the CWF matches while I was in town, so I called the Sportatorium and actually got to speak with Gordon Solie on the phone. Gordon not only procured front row tickets for me at Fort Homer Hesterly Armory, he also got me an isolated special seat at the Sportatorium for the tapings. I was right next to the "heels" dressing room, and that was an unforgettable experience. Every time one of the "heels" came out, the first thing they saw was me. I kept getting looks as if to say, 'Who's this punk kid?' It was kind of intimidating."

Bukantz and several friends were scheduled to compete later in the Atlanta Open where they hoped to secure spots on the 1984 U.S. Olympic Fencing Team. Along with his associates, Bukantz hoped to visit the GCW studio matches during his stay in the Peachtree State. "In addition to Gordon making sure that we got into the WTBS studios," stated Jeff, "the cameraman focused on us at times during the show. I got a lot of phone calls from people saying they saw me on TV."

Jeff's adventures led him back to the world of wrestling at a later date when he was trying to raise money for the Maccabiah Games. As the "Mighty Maccabee," Jeff donned some grappling gear and wrestled the Iron Sheik. "That charity match drew a lot of attention. It was filmed and ended up as a dollar item at Wal-Mart, but the thing sold over 600,000 copies. It was amazing." Years later, Jeff fulfilled a personal dream when the U.S. Fencing Association picked him to captain the 2004 U.S. Olympic fencing team in Athens. For the first time in 20 years, the U.S. fencers produced

medal winners by capturing both gold and bronze. Jeff was the U.S fencing team captain again during the 2008 Beijing Olympics when the team captured an unheard of six medals.

Chapter 10: Black Saturday

**In happier times, former Hillsborough County Sheriff Ed Blackburn,
Eddie Graham, and Gordon at Eddie's July 1980 retirement**

Things were changing in what was advertised as a new era for Gordon and Championship Wrestling from Florida. Gordon told Tom Ward of the

Tampa Tribune that the Sun Dome had more seating capacity and modern accommodations, including air conditioning, in comparison to Tampa's Armory. Although a final contract had not yet been signed, Gordon said he had a verbal commitment to present shows there on a regular basis. He felt it was the right move, but Gordon knew he would be sad to leave the "nostalgia" of more than 20 years of matches at the Fort Homer Hesterly Armory.

Within 24 hours, the story about moving the site for Tampa house shows was overshadowed by the hype for an upcoming wrestling event. On October 7, 1983, a press conference was held at Tampa's Hyatt Regency Hotel. Barbara Clary made the opening comments, led viewers into a conference room, and then turned things over to Gordon:

> In addition to almost all the major promoters from throughout the U.S., I see a contingency from Japan. There are some familiar faces from both Canada and Mexico. As I look

around the room, I recognize the top promoter from both South America and from Europe, and there is a group here from Australia and from New Zealand that are hopeful of bringing this event to the South Pacific. I understand the promoters from the Caribbean have also sent a representative. Bids have been submitted … awaiting the results.

Gordon then introduced the NWA president, Bob Geigel, who said he hadn't seen so much excitement since Harley Race and Dusty Rhodes met for a world title. An envelope was delivered to Geigel, who opened it and said, "Congratulations to Jim Crockett Promotions." Jim Crockett (Jr.) stepped up to the podium and addressed the attendees: "I want to thank the National Wrestling Alliance for their support in bringing this match about and for making Starrcade '83 at the Greensboro Coliseum, a reality."

Gordon broke in and went via satellite to Harley Race in Kansas City, and then to Ric Flair in

Charlotte, to get their input about the upcoming NWA world heavyweight title match in Greensboro. After the interviews, Gordon turned to Crockett, who said, "If my father was alive today, he would be proud to have seen us outbid promoters all over the world to bring this match to the Mid-Atlantic area."

The very next day, October 8 1983, the Los Angeles Times released a story by Richard Hoffer, with the title "Confessions of a Pro Wrestling Booker." The subtitle read, "Professor Says He Just Got Tired of Making a Fool Out of the Public." The "Professor" was Roy Shire, the wrestling promoter in northern California.

Shire, who had been a major name in Ohio and the southeast during the 1950s, had been promoting the San Francisco territory since the 1960s. His shows at San Francisco's Cow Palace drew some of the biggest crowds for professional wrestling in the country, averaging 14,000 fans and $40,000 gates per show in 1962, a figure that was unheard

of at the time.

Shire exposed the wrestling business on television stations, but was most well-known for the article in the Los Angeles Times. Upset over the fact that his business had failed, his intent was to "kill" the wrestling business in California. In the Sacramento Bee, Bill Conlin, who had waged a 20-year war against pro wrestling, interviewed Shire and published a two-part article which appeared on the April 24 and April 25, 1984 editions. The titles of the articles were "Former Wrestler Takes Down Sport" and "Wrestling Promoter Says He Rigged Memorial Matches."

What Shire didn't count on was that pro wrestling had been "exposed" many times in the past, yet it continued to thrive. Regardless of what wrestling fans believed about pro wrestling, they continued to support the business and do so to this day.

The attendance at the highly promoted Starrcade

‘83 show was proof of that. With 15,447 people in attendance, the Greensboro Coliseum was sold out. Harley Race said they couldn’t get any more fans in the building because the fire marshal shut it down and wouldn’t let anyone one else in the doors. The gate had been expected to surpass the Coliseum record, set by Elvis Presley in 1977. "I think the only reason that we didn’t gross more than the Elvis show was because they charged more money per ticket than we did," claimed Race.

The anticipated gate didn’t count the money received from fans who watched the matches on closed-circuit television. During an interview with Dinita James of the Greensboro Daily News, David Crockett said it was the first of its type in pro wrestling, but that wasn’t true. The first pro wrestling card to be aired on closed-circuit television, held live at the Los Angeles Olympic Auditorium, was a match between Mil Mascaras and John Tolos. The WWWF also had been presenting wrestling via closed-circuit TV at the Felt Forum in New York as far back as the 1970s.

The fans that saw the show live paid between $15 and $25 per ticket, in comparison to the closed-circuit fees of either $12.50 or $15. A live feed went into homes in Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and Trinidad, which allowed the islanders to watch a popular wrestler from the Caribbean, Carlos Colon. Delayed broadcasts also aired in New Zealand. Bob Caudle and Gordon co-hosted the highly anticipated match. Gordon kicked things off by claiming that "two words" were the key to the "ten pounds of gold." Those two words were "intensity" and "execution."

On the card, Ric Flair regained the NWA world heavyweight title from Harley Race. Over the years, the two men battled many times in the "squared circle," and Harley considers the match against Flair at Starrcade '83 as one of their better ones.

Just before Christmas, Gordon was back in Tampa to attend a ceremony honoring one of his friends, Father Higgins, who was the closest

religious figure in Gordon's adult life. Father Higgins, Gordon, Johnny Fernandez, Tom McEwen, and a few others had a regular luncheon as a group for many years. The celebration that Gordon witnessed was the Mass of Investiture when the Very Reverend Lawrence E. Higgins, Vicar General, became Monsignor Higgins.

On page 57 in the January 1984 edition of In Sports, Lucy Taylor described Gordon as "a multifaceted and articulate man with a keen interest in human nature and world affairs …" Gordon said technology was advanced with the robotization of factories and the space program, but humans didn't seem to be smart enough to live together in peace. Gordon also shared his thoughts on Reagan, capital punishment, religion, and women. He thought women of all species were the fiercest fighters in the world, particularly their willingness to give up their lives to protect their offspring. Some of Gordon's candid opinions about both genders appeared on page 59 in the same interview by Taylor:

… "Females fight for biological projection; males fight for the right to mate, and in human beings, for politics."

… "I also think women are superior, anyway, physically superior, and a lot of men are jumping straight up in the air on that, but women live longer, can withstand more pain and adversity. If there is a divine plan, I really have to think of God as a woman."

… "Males only take advantage of the momentary physical superiority. It's a shame really that men feel they must maintain this God-like image of physical strength when all things worthwhile are mental."

Wherever Gordon went, it seemed there were always people either wanting his help or seeking an interview or an autograph. The demands on Gordon were high, but he seemed to take them in stride, even though he maintained an extremely visible profile. In the same month as the Taylor interview, the Tampa Museum expressed its gratitude to Gordon for his help with "Family

Sports Night," celebrating Super Bowl XVIII. Hundreds of people were introduced to the museum during the afternoon festivities.

Gordon also signed an agreement on behalf of CWF to bring wrestlers to the Strawberry Festival/Hillsborough County Fair. Dusty Rhodes, Barry Windham, Billy Jack, and Mike Rotundo all agreed to sign autographs for the fans, and Gordon accepted an invitation to attend the Governor's Luncheon during the festivities.

Despite the obvious effect Gordon had on professional wrestling, he always downplayed his role, insisting that he was just the "drumroll." It was the wrestlers who were important. Others, however, insisted that Gordon was the main reason the WTBS show had the success it did. Mark Wolf gave an example of Gordon calling the play-by-play:

> There's a belly-to-back suplex. He did not get underneath the center of gravity, but forelifted

him … an inside step-over, back to that reverse death lock with a sky high bridge, a beautiful move … notice how those deltoid muscles are being stretched in the shoulder of the Super Destroyer … a beautiful, sudden drop toehold, well executed, and rides his man with a great deal of alacrity. (1C)

Ron Garvin worked with Gordon at different times over the years and stated that Gordon was a big part of the success in both the Florida and Georgia territories. "Gordon was the best announcer in pro wrestling," said Ron. "He knew the names of all the holds and counter holds, and made it easy … everything flowed. But Gordon didn't have the ego like some other announcers," added Ron. "While I was working in Georgia, Gordon gave me a nickname. I used a punch as a finishing move to knock out my opponents. Gordon started to refer to me as 'hands of stone,' a name people used in boxing when they referred to Roberto Duran. That nickname stayed with me for many years."

In 1984, Georgia Championship Wrestling was the number one rated show on cable. According to A.C. Nielson figures, World Championship Wrestling on WTBS was reaching more than 3,000,000 homes every week.

On July 14, 1984, a day which would later be known as "Black Saturday," viewers tuned in to watch World Championship Wrestling on WTBS … but it wasn't the familiar face of Gordon Solie which greeted the viewers. Instead, Freddie Miller introduced Vince McMahon of the World Wrestling Federation, who then proceeded to air tapes of WWF matches. All kinds of stories appeared concerning the takeover:

> McMahon's fight to wrestle control of Georgia Championship Wrestling began last spring. He managed to buy a majority interest in the company, but a number of shareholders were unwilling to sell. The matter landed in court and was finally resolved when the last of the shareholders, fearing a lengthy and

costly court battle, threw in the towel.
("Grappling with" 7D)

In a secret deal, Jim Barnett, Jack Brisco, Jerry Brisco, and Paul Jones [the promoter, not the wrestler] had sold their stock in Georgia Championship Wrestling to McMahon. The minority shareholders — Ole Anderson, Gene Anderson, Fred Ward, and Ralph Freed — were not told about the deal until it was too late and McMahon controlled the company.

Fans of the show went berserk and called anyone who would listen. On Monday morning, the telephones at WTBS rang off the hook. They also received bags of mail from furious viewers who had complaints about the quality of the wrestling programming and Vince McMahon. Some of the feedback found in Gordon's files included:

"Greedy, jealous and unscrupulous are all words to describe Vince McMahon …"
"I hope you're happy, you stinking little

worm. You weren't happy by pushing Southwest Texas Wrestling off the USA Network; you've gone and committed the worst crime ever."
"Who the hell do you think you are? The WWF does not belong in Georgia."
"We would like to know if there's anything that you can do to bring the NWA back to us. After all, what is wrestling without Gordon Solie's exciting commentary?"
"… the excellent commentary of Gordon Solie and Ole Anderson. It's sad when the WWF had to take over the number one wrestling program …"
"Vince McMahon is a jerk in the lowest sense of the word, destroying the NWA in Georgia with his underhanded methods. We want Gordon Solie and the NWA back on WTBS."
"Saturday night I turned on Channel 17 and was shocked to see Vince McMahon there. Then he said Georgia is now a WWF area and I got a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. Monday morning I was one of the

first to call the WCW office and complain and learned that the best announcer Gordon Solie won't be back and I don't blame him. I don't want to be associated with anyone in the WWF. Their wrestling show is the worst I've ever seen."

"I'm sick. The best and most colorful sports announcer in the state (if not the country) is off the air. I'm talking, of course, about Gordon Solie, the voice of the old World Championship Wrestling on WTBS. Say what you will about pro wrestling, and what a farce it is, but Gordon is in a class beyond criticism. Unlike most of the air-brains who giggle and pose at 11:20 PM and call themselves sportscasters, Gordon is a real pro …"

What most people don't realize is that there was a common thread among the thousands of letters received by WTBS, not to mention the phone calls made to the station. The fans didn't complain about their favorite wrestlers not being there. They

simply wanted to see and hear Gordon Solie. During his 25 years of wrestling broadcasting, Gordon never wasted any time putting himself over. He always made sure the spotlight was on the wrestlers in the ring, and not himself. The end result of that was that Gordon became as big a star as the wrestlers themselves, and that was proven out by the reaction of the fans to the Black Saturday show.

Gordon was beside himself. Prior to July 14, he had been the host of the most popular, televised wrestling program in the world, and in one swoop, it was gone. He called it a "forced buyout." He remembered McMahon knocking CWF off the air in Jacksonville when he paid station management for the time slot. CWF found another station to air its program, but this scenario was much worse. Georgia Championship Wrestling had been consumed.

In a letter dated July 17, 1984, Ron Allen, former ring announcer and timekeeper for GCW, told

Gordon his phone had been ringing off the hook with calls from Texas, Oklahoma, North Carolina, Tennessee, Florida, the Virgin Islands, and every part of Georgia. The questions were all similar: "What the hell happened?" "Where is our program, our wrestlers, our Gordon Solie?"

In response to the changes in televised wrestling on WTBS, Howard Heavner wrote an article in the Douglas County Sentinel:

> Speaking of sportscasters … I am still in shock about WTBS dumping Gordon Solie and NWA wrestling on Saturdays and Sundays, and replacing it with the WWF, Vince McMahon, and Freddie Miller. Pro wrestling is a show … but Gordon Solie is a fantastic announcer who really made that funny stuff believable. The WWF is not the NWA … Vince McMahon's not Gordon Solie … and Freddie Miller is, er … I don't know what he's supposed to be. ("Tiger Tales")

The media had heavy coverage of the pro wrestling cable saga and Titan Sports was in the limelight. Titan supplied programming to WOR-TV in New York, the USA Network, and the Madison Square Garden Network. With the takeover of the Georgia Championship Wrestling time slot, McMahon also was supplying programs to WTBS (Zacks 3). With all the complaints that came into WTBS about the disappearance of GCW, and with a push from Ann Gunkel, the network agreed to air four one-hour shows with a new name — Championship Wrestling from Georgia. Initially, the show aired in a time slot at 7:35 a.m. on Saturdays, but shortly afterwards, that time slot was moved up to nine o'clock a.m.

Ole Anderson, one of the owners of the new company, hired Gordon to host the new show. Each Saturday, Gordon was met at Atlanta International Airport by Louise Manning, who had come to work for Georgia Championship Wrestling at the same time in the early '70s as Gordon. Louise was experienced with the office

part of professional wrestling, and in order to help get things going with the new television show, she managed the business from headquarters in the living room of her home. Ole Anderson, the owner/promoter of the company, wouldn't let Gordon smoke in his car, and Gordon wasn't going to go that long without a cigarette, so he rode to Macon, where the matches were taped, with Louise. It didn't bother Louise because Gordon always rolled down the car window when he was smoking. Normally, Ole also had his partner, Ralph Freed, riding with him, so it all worked out.

The schedule was basically the same for Gordon because he continued his duties with Championship Wrestling from Florida, and then flew to Atlanta each week for the new Georgia program. As a side venture, Gordon also went into a partnership with Judge Ed Hinson and a man named Michael Napoli to purchase some real estate on Howard Avenue in Tampa. Gordon hoped that he and his partners could acquire an entire city block.

In August 1984, Gordon received a letter from the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, commending him for his effort in locating a missing child. After Gordon had shown Angela Powell's photo on CWF, ten relevant phone calls came in to the Missing Children's Information Clearinghouse. She was found and was returned safely to her mother.

He also received a letter dated August 22, 1984, from a lady who had heard that Gordon's book, Master of the Ring, was going to be released. She wanted to know when and where she could buy a couple of copies, and was extremely happy to see Gordon back on the air with the grapplers in Georgia, even though the show was seen on Saturday mornings. According to her, "No one can understand why Ted Turner would replace the best wrestling with the WWF. In this area, a lot of television sets are turned off on Saturday night because of the change."

With everything that happened, Gordon was in

need of some good news, or at least something to make him laugh. Along with a letter dated September 17, 1984, Gordon received an article written by Chuck Shepherd called The ABC's of Wrestling, which was published in a men's magazine named Gallery. As Shepherd explained it to Gordon, "It's a humorous, yet fairly 'Inside' treatment of the industry, organized by the alphabet, e.g., A (Andre the Giant), B (blood), C (cable TV), and so forth." The 'D' section included comments about Dusty Rhodes: "Shaped like a potato with D-cups (highly fondle-worth say his groupies), 'The American Dream' is the coolest shit-kicker on the planet." Of course, in Shepherd's article, the letter "S" stood for Solie, and it went like this:

> Solie is a blend of Walter Cronkite and Mr. Rogers, with better deadpan than Woody Allen. Articulate far beyond his audience (he once quoted Nietzsche's Thus Spoke Zarathustra), he uses only one- and six–syllable words, and his description of holds

> sounds like biology text. All other announcers are either promoters' relatives or victims of announcers' Darwinism who fell into wrestling. ("Wrestling from")

Even the name of Shepherd's company was a bit different; it was called "DEADFROMTHENECKUP, Inc." Gordon got some chuckles out of the article, but his mind continued to go back to the loss of his host position on the Georgia Championship Wrestling program. One evening, he sat in the comfort of his family room — vodka in one hand and a cigarette in the other, and spoke to his son-in-law, Bob Allyn. Gordon said McMahon's company offered him a fair wage to continue on, and there was even a mention of him co-hosting with Gene Okerlund. He didn't have a problem with the money offer or with Gene Okerlund, but Gordon said they wanted him to wear a tuxedo, and "he wasn't going to wear any go—amn tuxedo."

Allyn didn't believe for a moment that the tuxedo

was the real problem, but out of respect for his father-in law, he remained silent. Allyn knew that loyalty for the old territories ran through Gordon's veins, along with an excess amount of vodka and the plaque from four packs of cigarettes a day. Something Gordon said to Allyn indicated that his decision had to do with the way he was raised. "I was taught that if I went to the dance with someone, that's who I should go home with." Gordon paused, put down his glass, took another drag off his cigarette, leaned forward, pointed at Allyn with cigarette in hand, and said, "This guy, McMahon, is poised to make the biggest impact on professional wrestling of anyone in the world. You watch … and mark my words."

With the takeover of the TBS wrestling program, McMahon turned the wrestling world on its ear, but Gordon refused to talk badly about him or the direction the industry was headed. Gordon had a lot of respect for the wrestling business and didn't want to do anything that might hurt it.

In fact, when questioned by the media, Gordon was quick to come up with answers to explain the mystique of the professional wrestling business. Mike Steere of the Toledo Magazine asked Gordon about the fan response to pro wrestling, which seemed to be a lot more intense than the fan response to other types of sports entertainment. Gordon's response was:

> The incredible involvement of the fans has to do with the direct moral appeal of the wrestlers and the predominance of personality over athletics in the ring. Other sports, particularly team sports, homogenize competitors by putting them in uniforms, and sometimes hiding them entirely under protective equipment. Wrestlers exaggerate who they are to the point that who they are and what they represent is more important than what they're doing. (9)

Kevin Sullivan was an example of Gordon's line of thinking. Fans tuning in to Championship

Wrestling from Florida witnessed the attention garnered by Sullivan when he headed a group called the "Army of Darkness." It was "good versus evil," with Kevin's antics as a "bad guy" taking the center stage, and at times, overshadowing the actual wrestling portion of the show. During his reign over the Army of Darkness, Kevin Sullivan even brainwashed one of his followers, Mike Davis, into believing that he was Dusty Rhodes, the "American Dream." In ensuing wrestling appearances, Davis imitated and even claimed to be Rhodes.

While Sullivan drew attention on the Florida show, another man began to make his presence known to the viewers of the new Georgia show. Manager Jimmy Hart spoke about his early encounters with Gordon Solie:

"I was working in Memphis, and the promoter there, Jerry Jarrett, worked out some kind of a deal with Ole Anderson. Jerry said he was going to start sending some of us to Atlanta every week to

appear on Championship Wrestling from Georgia. The announcer there was Gordon Solie, who I had seen before during telecasts on WTBS. I knew that Gordon was smooth and didn't upstage the wrestlers during interviews. In Tennessee, I worked with Lance Russell, who was also a top-flight announcer, and I was looking forward to meeting Gordon.

"When I first met Gordon, he asked me if it would bother me if he smoked. I don't smoke cigarettes, but I was around smoke from my days when I performed with a band called the Gentrys, so I told him that it wouldn't bother me. I soon found out that Gordon took his smoking seriously. When I came out for an interview with Gordon, I had a towel with me. Usually, I had the towel because I used it as a special effect. If someone got hit, I'd throw the towel in the air and it seemed to magnify the contact. Well, when I approached Gordon for our interview, I realized that I wouldn't need the towel, so I tossed it behind the announcers table. What I didn't realize was that the

towel landed on Gordon's cigarettes and hid them from sight. Gordon proceeded with part of our interview and then we cut for a short break. All of a sudden, I heard Gordon barking loudly, 'Jesus Christ! Who took my cigarettes?'

"It finally dawned on me to go get my towel, and when I picked it up, there was Gordon's pack of smokes. I wasn't about to tell Gordon Solie that I had covered up his cigarettes, so I called to him. 'Here are your cigarettes, Mr. Solie. They must have fallen under the table.'

"After working with Gordon, I came to a couple of conclusions: certain guys could sell tickets to wrestling events. Gene Okerlund, for example, could sell tickets. Gordon Solie could sell tickets. And although I hate to steal a line from Bret Hart, it definitely applies to Gordon as an announcer: 'The best there is, the best there ever was, and the best there ever will be.'"

The two promoters, Ole Anderson and Jerry

Jarrett, decided to exchange more than just wrestlers for a while. Lance Russell described the situation, "Whether it was Ole or Jerry, someone came up with the idea to have both Gordon and I cover the matches in Memphis. It sounded great to me because I had met Gordon years before in Tampa when I was in the area trying to lock up a TV deal. Not only did I get to meet Gordon, he invited me to appear on Championship Wrestling from Florida. Of course, I willingly accepted the invite and had a great time.

"When I heard that they were going to fly Gordon in every week to Memphis, I looked forward to seeing Gordon again. I did my usual announcing duties with my long-time sidekick, Dave Brown, while Gordon broadcast in a separate studio. While I was in my normal surrounding with the wrestlers and Dave, poor Gordon was in a studio all by himself, watching a monitor and doing his own play-by-play for the Memphis matches. I didn't know how he could stand it, being in that studio by himself. Evidently, the plan was to have

Gordon Solie seen on certain networks announcing for Memphis wrestling. I think they ran into some production problems because after two or three months, they discontinued the whole deal. It was fun for a while because I'd pick Gordon up at the airport and we'd have a chance to visit for a while before we got to the studios."

Even though he was no longer on a national stage, Gordon still received a considerable amount of mail. One day, while looking through a stack of letters, he found some humorous predictions from Chuck Shepherd called "You Better Be Ready For 1985, BRUTHA." The crystal ball revelations by Shepherd covered events "Not guaranteed to happen in 1985." One of the predictions was: "March 27: WWF announces first cable TV all-wrestling channel (WTV); McMahon to be called 'Match jockey' and schedules himself to host 20 hours daily." Another prediction was, "September 2: Bill Apter wins Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for his Pro Wrestling Illustrated profiles."

The humor only held Gordon's interest briefly because he was more focused on the fact that the face of wrestling was changing with a variety of new televised wrestling programs and marketing techniques. One example was a very popular segment of a WWF show called Tuesday Night Titans, during which Fred Blassie hosted an interview segment called "Advice for the Lovelorn." The program was extremely popular and offered a new format in which to bring interviews into viewers' living rooms.

Gordon was well aware of another promotion in use by McMahon. He called it a "976" phone number, which allowed companies to have messages available 24 hours a day. Customers could call the phone number and get the latest news. In the wrestling business, the phone messages could include match announcements, rankings, feuds, etc. It was a great way to increase fan loyalty and viewer participation.

The situation with the WWF wasn't foremost in

Gordon's mind due to problems facing CWF. Due to bad investments, Eddie Graham had been plummeting emotionally, and he was generally wreaking havoc on his own life. He was drinking heavily and his mind was not focused on the wrestling business. It wasn't like the old days when Cowboy Luttrall had the muscle, Eddie had the political contacts, and Gordon handled the public relations. Luttrall might not have put up with the crap that Eddie was going through. Just like he did with Gordon, Luttrall might have grabbed Eddie by the throat and ordered him to get his act together.

But Luttrall wasn't around. Despondent over the turn of events in his life, Eddie took a gun and shot himself in the head at his Tampa home on January 20, 1985. He died early the next morning. Professional wrestling lost one of the greatest minds of the business, the city of Tampa lost one of its benefactors, Mike Graham lost his dad, and Gordon lost a long-time, close friend and associate. Daniel McLaughlin of the Tampa

Tribune characterized Eddie professionally as, "violent, uncompromising and nasty," but privately as "a charitable, compassionate man."

In the January 22, 1985, edition of the Tampa Tribune, Jim Selman talked about Eddie's contributions to society in an article titled "Self-inflicted gunshot kills Eddie Graham":

> Graham championed amateur wrestling at the high school and college levels and donated approximately $10,000 to the University of Florida in 1978 for outfitting a wrestling room which came to be known as the Eddie Graham Room. To Graham's dismay, however, Florida dropped wrestling a couple of years later. He also established a $500 wrestling scholarship at the University of Tampa.
> Graham's benevolence brought him many honors from various organizations. The PAL gave him its achievement award in 1963 and the Boys Clubs honored him with its Man-

Boy award in 1970. In 1978, the Tampa Sports Club made Graham its sports citizen of the year for major contributions to amateur wrestling. In 1980, Sen. Richard Stone awarded to Graham an American flag which flew over the White House, and proceeds from an Eddie Graham Happy Birthday Roast went to the leukemia fund. The Florida Sheriff's Boys Ranch honored him in 1982. (1C)

Gordon estimated that Tampa wrestling contributed well over $500,000 to the Florida Sheriffs Boys Ranch and Girls Villa, one of Eddie's pet projects since 1961. That was part of the business that Gordon, Cowboy and Eddie all took pride in. The other part of the wrestling business in Tampa had changed drastically from the early days. In the past, Eddie and Gordon talked about what they needed to do and just did it. That scenario evolved into Gordon sitting at board meetings, waiting for a consensus from a voting group of investors.

The Eddie Graham Memorial Foundation was formed shortly after Eddie's death, and Gordon received details from Terry Edmonson of Penn Mutual. Attorneys offered free services for any legal work in regard to setting up or running the Foundation and plans began for a $100-a-plate dinner to begin raising funds.

In February 1985, Gordon began book signings for Master of the Ring. The book wasn't a major literary accomplishment, by any standards, but Gordon hoped sales would raise additional funds for Lil' Kids Publishing, which helped children learn reading fundamentals. Gordon paid Louise Manning a specific amount per copy to collect book orders from the post office and mail out copies. On February 9, Gordon appeared at Haslam's Bookstore in St. Petersburg, and then on to Orlando. Next, he was a guest on Love Radio in Miami prior to an appearance at a local B. Dalton Bookseller. Russell Myerson, executive vice president of the CW Television Network, was working in the Jacksonville market in those days,

and said he would make sure that a book signing at Walden Books got plenty of publicity if Gordon could set it up.

Gordon appeared there and the fans who attended cleaned out the inventory.

Professional wrestling was quickly becoming a television business, but there still was a need to bring the grapplers out to the live shows. Gordon signed an agreement for wrestler appearances at the Strawberry Festival/Hillsborough County Fair in February. Instead of autograph sessions like the year before, the 1985 festivities included wrestling matches by CWF wrestlers. It was a local event, and nothing by comparison to the show by the WWF advertised in Variety. The event, which was called "Wrestlemania," was booked at Madison Square Garden, and featured "Mr. T" and Hulk Hogan against "Rowdy" Roddy Piper and Paul Orndorff. In an interview with Ancil Davis of Amusement Business, Vince McMahon talked about the changes in wrestling under his direction:

> Wrestling has been traditionally a geographically fragmented industry. Different promoters have worked in different territories, but that's changed drastically. We've become aggressive in our posture. We're in arenas and auditoriums, but we're also on over 100 TV stations and cable. No one else even comes close. They're just not out there. (26)

A lady in Ohio dropped Gordon a note and included a clipping about one of the WWF stars, Roddy Piper. She added a P.S. about Piper's kilt: "Ask Roddy to please keep his skirt down when on camera." Piper was a hot commodity in pro wrestling at the time, but the superstar was still Hulk Hogan. "Hulkamania," as it was called, was showing up on T-shirts and headbands, and the wrestling fans were all talking about Hogan.

In the meantime, Gordon heard concerns about the NWA's apparent decline from an acquaintance by the name of Gil Cabot, a man who had walked

into the Sportatorium years before, wanting to try out for Gordon's job as host of CWF. Instead of chasing him away, Gordon took the time to speak with Cabot and offer some advice. The two had kept in touch and Gil thought he could make a deal with a network on behalf of the NWA. He thought it was important for the NWA to act quickly.

In 1984, John Burzichelli approached Pro Wrestling Illustrated about producing a video compilation of wrestling matches. John already had Gordon under contract and had talked to Bill Apter about co-hosting the production. Burzichelli's plan came to fruition in 1985, and the principals, cast, and crew assembled for the production. On the night before the taping, Gordon, Bill, John, and Craig Peters (one of the producers) met in a lounge where a live band was performing. When Bill Apter jumped on stage and sang with the group, a woman asked Gordon if the man singing was the well-known musician, Paul Shaffer. Gordon told her, "Yes, the singer is Shaffer," (when it was actually Apter) and did his best to set

up Apter with the nice-looking lady. Apter was not interested in the least, and was more concerned about Gordon's alcohol consumption and how it would affect the next morning's video session.

The next morning, to Bill's amazement, Gordon looked great and was ready to get to work. The producers, however, were not prepared for what happened during the first take. Bill and Gordon had known each other for ten years, and during that time, they developed some funny routines. Before the taping began, they planned a surprise for everyone. When the session began, Gordon and Bill changed their personas and spoke like two gay men. After the ensuing laughter died away, the co-hosts got down to serious business and production of the first pro-wrestling, commercial video was under way. Bill said he got twisted around on a couple of lines in the script, but Gordon blew right through his lines with ease. "I always wanted to be more involved with wrestling interviews," stated Bill, "and I'd made plenty of appearances, but I learned a valuable lesson from Gordon while we

were working on Pro Wrestling Illustrated's 'Lords of the Ring-Superstars and Superbouts.' Gordon had never seen the script until that morning, and he glanced at a section, memorized part of it, and then put it into his own words while incorporating the main ideas. He was incredible. I was struggling trying to repeat the script verbatim and found it much easier to do it Gordon's way."

The written script for Gordon began with:

Hello, and welcome to Pro Wrestling Illustrated's Superstars and Superbouts. I'm your host, Gordon Solie, and for the next 60 minutes, you're going to see professional wrestling at its finest. All the action, excitement, and brutality of the king of sports are presented by the largest-selling, most-respected magazine in the world, Pro Wrestling Illustrated. And now I have the pleasure to introduce my co-host, the senior editor of Pro Wrestling Illustrated, Bill Apter. ("Lords of the Ring-Superstars and

Superbouts")

Apter spoke next and previewed a match between the Junkyard Dog and the Missing Link that took place in front of 43,000 fans at Texas Stadium. As the video progressed, Gordon and Apter commented back and forth about historic matches and profiled wrestlers in between. Released on March 20, 1985, Lords of the Ring-Superstars and Superbouts was the beginning of a new era in professional wrestling.

Gordon continued to make the trip to Atlanta each week, but the business office of Championship Wrestling from Georgia was no longer run from Louise Manning's living room. It had been moved to the CNN Plaza. That didn't last long because more network changes were made to the WTBS Saturday evening time slot. McMahon sold the time slot to Jim Crockett Promotions for a reported $1,000,000. Crockett absorbed Championship Wrestling from Georgia and began to air World Championship Wrestling. Crockett

already had his own staff, including an announcer, so Gordon was off the air in Atlanta. He was not alone.

The changes in the WTBS broadcasting agreements put the kibosh on a popular television show called Mid-South Wrestling. It was owned by a well-known wrestler, "Cowboy" Bill Watts, a man who was earning a reputation as a capable promoter. The 6:05 Saturday night time slot on WTBS would have fit nicely into Watts' plans to put his own television show, Mid-South Wrestling, onto a national stage. Not only did Watts lose any chance of getting that slot, he suddenly found his wrestling program taken from the WTBS schedule altogether. Along with getting McMahon's time slot, Crockett received the exclusive right to present professional wrestling programs on WTBS. Just like Gordon Solie, Mid-South Wrestling disappeared from WTBS.

Gordon was still working with Championship Wrestling from Florida, however, and promoted a

new angle that had the grapplers looking forward to a trip to Aruba. An agreement was reached between Gordon Solie Enterprises, Inc. and Robert Auxier for a card at the Concorde Arena on June 1, 1985. Hector Guerrero was booked to defend his Florida heavyweight belt against "Wild" Bill Irwin, and Wahoo McDaniel was scheduled to face Jesse "Bulldog" Barr in a "Bounty Match." Midget wrestlers Little Tokyo and Cowboy Lang were also slated to appear, along with the special guest announcer, Gordon Solie.

Gordon's itinerary changed again in June when he agreed to announce shows for the Fuller family, who promoted pro wrestling in Alabama and Tennessee. The promotion had been known for years as Southeastern Championship Wrestling, the name that still appeared atop the "Ringsider" programs. The new promotion, however, was advertised as Continental Championship Wrestling, but the territory still promoted the old Southeastern titles. Besides changing the name, the Fullers replaced announcer, Charlie Platt, with

Gordon, and planned to alternate weekly between house shows and studio shows.

On June 18, 1985, Russell Myerson, director of programming and operations at WJKS-TV, informed Gordon that CWF fared better than the WWF in the Jacksonville market. On WJKS, CWF got a 4 rating/21 share in Nielson and a 4 rating/24 share in the ARB, both up from the previous year. The station which used to carry CWF was carrying the WWF programming instead, but they were only pulling a 2 rating/8 share in Nielson and a 4 rating/10 share in ARB. Those numbers were down from the year before.

According to the July 25, 1985 edition of the Tampa Tribune, the WWF had a wrestling card scheduled for August 18, 1985 at the Sun Dome in Tampa. Hulk Hogan wrestled Greg Valentine, while WWF tag team champions Mike Rotundo and Barry Windham defended their title against Nikolai Volkoff and Iron Sheik. The fact that a group in opposition to CWF could promote a show

in Tampa was definitely a sign of the times.

In July, Gordon kept a close eye on another fledgling promotion called International Wrestling Alliance. The promoter, John Vest, said the quality of CWF had diminished, and he had already promoted house shows in Tampa, Bradenton, Winter Haven, and Ocala. While speaking with Bill Fay of the Tampa Tribune, Vest also claimed he had TV stations begging him for the right to air his wrestling matches. It was Gordon's contention that the format used by CWF for years was still pleasing the fans, regardless of what any competitor might say, and the attendance for CWF was still running about the same. As a rule, it usually dropped a bit in the summer months because the snow birds went back up north, but attendance remained around 15,000 patrons a week for both June and July.

Wrestling competitors were hardly the only thing occupying Gordon's mind at the time. His long-time friend, Milt Spencer, another one of Tampa's

favorite broadcasters, was fighting for his life. On July 25, 1985, Milt lost his battle with cancer. Gordon thought about their radio days together in the early ‘50s, their wrestling coverage in 1959, the money they had raised together for cancer research, and all the booze they had consumed. He remembered Milt coming out to the lake house for cocktails and games of pool.

To Gordon, it was the loss of another close friend … first Eddie, and now Milt.

Chapter 11: Without Benefit of Lubricant

Gordon with Miss Linda and Adrian Street

On behalf of CWF, Gordon was talking up an NWA extravaganza called the Battle of the Belts, a three-hour television event from the Sun Dome on

September 2, 1985. Headlined by an NWA world heavyweight title match between champion Ric Flair and challenger Wahoo McDaniel, the event was scheduled to air in markets other than Florida: Dallas, Houston, Atlanta, and Boston, plus a film crew from Tokyo was to be on hand. Gordon also negotiated a contract for wrestlers to appear at the Brevard County Fair in November. The contract called for fees to be paid directly to Gordon Solie Enterprises and for cash to be on hand to pay the wrestlers.

Television coverage of pro wrestling swelled in the markets of Florida in a big way. In Jacksonville, for example, over-the-air TV channels offered Mid-Atlantic Wrestling (Charlotte), World Class Wrestling (Texas), World Wrestling Federation, Championship Wrestling from Florida, and Worldwide Championship Wrestling. In addition, cable providers offered Prime Time Wrestling, Professional Championship Wrestling, Wrestling TNT, All American Wrestling, World

Championship Wrestling, and The Best of Championship Wrestling (McAllister 2).

And there were many other promotions available around the country. Gordon visited with several different promotions, including announcing some programs for International Championship Wrestling (ICW). ICW house shows were held at the time in towns throughout Maine and Massachusetts. Unfortunately, after Gordon severed ties with ICW, his attorney, Michael Lebron, had to notify ICW promoter Mario Savoldi that Gordon's likeness was still being used without permission or compensation. Evidently, an ICW show which featured Gordon aired on Atlanta's Channel 11 in October. When attempts to contact Savoldi proved fruitless, Lebron contacted James Rosin, president of RLM Associates in Massachusetts. Lebron said the unauthorized use of Gordon's likeness was "piracy" and he was prepared to move forward with any measures necessary on Gordon's behalf.

At the time, Gordon was more upset about his and others' failed efforts to find a missing 17-year-old girl named Corinne Perry. Reverend Delores Doench from Creston, Iowa, thanked Gordon later for his efforts, but had the unpleasant duty of notifying him that the girl's remains had been found. In November 1985, Gordon received more bad news when he received papers naming him in a lawsuit. A fan, James Gravitt, claimed Bob Roop and Kevin Sullivan "bodily assaulted and battered" him without provocation. His council wanted a response from Roop, Sullivan, CWF, and Gordon Solie Enterprises.

Bob Roop had just returned to the area and spoke about the change in Gordon's temperament since the two of them successfully worked together years before. "In late 1985, I returned to work in Florida, and I had an opportunity to spend more time around Gordon. Within a few months, Hiro Matsuda asked me to do the booking for CWF. In that role, I worked very closely with Gordon for the entire year I held the position. We did our TV taping on

Wednesday, taping two shows, with the interviews done immediately afterwards, before heading out to Miami for that evening's show. During that year, Gordon was doing TV on Mondays for the Tennessee promotion. I don't remember the details, but he wouldn't return to Tampa until Tuesday afternoon. I would spend Tuesday at the office working on the TV shows that would be taped the following day, and Gordon would come from the airport to the office so I could go over the TV shows with him. During this time, however, I saw an older, bitter, Gordon Solie. He had been turned loose by Championship Wrestling from Georgia and he had lost his national exposure. At the same time, the onslaught of nationally televised wrestling programs were bringing other, less-experienced announcers to the forefront of the profession.

"I got to know Gordon as a person during that period, and he shared his personal feelings with me. He had a couple of specific complaints which really rankled him, and I really couldn't blame

him, except for the fact that his bitterness was impacting his life in a negative way. Gordon's primary beef was that, during all the years he worked for CWF, the powers-that-be at CWF, under the leadership of Eddie Graham, had never officially "smartened him up" and included him in their inner circle. Instead, even though he was constantly exposed to the inner dynamics of the business, the company 'executives' treated him like a 'mark.' That, of course, was an insult to the intelligence of someone who was even less intelligent and experienced than Gordon.

"His second gripe, in my opinion, ties in with the first one. During all the years he worked for CWF, they never gave him a raise in pay. I don't remember the exact figure he was paid when he was initially hired as a young unknown, but whatever it was, Gordon told me that the figure never changed. I have a hard time believing that, but that's exactly what he said.

"In my opinion, the two circumstances were

interrelated. If Graham had allowed Gordon into the inner circle, it would have been impossible to deny him a pay raise, especially in lieu of the tremendously lucrative years they had experienced for at least two decades while Gordon worked for them. However, by maintaining Gordon's position as merely a mouthpiece, or "Mike Holder," as Freddy Miller used to call himself at Championship Wrestling from Georgia, Graham could justify paying him peanuts. I'm sure Graham was also aware of how exposure on CWF helped Gordon expand his financial welfare in other areas, which may have been how Graham justified it to himself. Regardless, Gordon was extremely bitter and despondent about being treated in such a disrespectful manner.

"It would have been foolish of me not to tap into Gordon's years of experience and expertise, and he was generally very helpful. Gordon had worked with dozens of bookers, including an earlier incarnation of me as assistant booker to Harley Race, Mark Lewin (he lasted three days), and

Louie Tillet.

"Strangely, Gordon took my consideration/acceptance of his ideas as an indicator that he was in charge. Nothing could have been further from the truth. During my first booking job in California during the late 70s, I constantly fought unwanted input from Roy Shire, who had run the territory for the majority of his ownership, and by not changing directions, had run it into the ground. After having Shire second guess every decision I made, and then later resisting interference and treachery from former booker Robert Fuller when I took the booking job in Knoxville, I insisted on being the boss when I accepted the job with CWF. It was not ego, but I was the one dealing with the talent. If I didn't have the final say-so, then they could refuse/do poorly whatever I asked them to do. Being able to hire and, more importantly, fire uncooperative employees is an absolute necessity to managing employees. Anyway, Gordon maybe thinking I was just the latest in the line of interchangeable booking

agents, seemed to get the impression that I was to do what he said whenever he offered up suggestions about the TV shows. Specifically, during a Tuesday skull session with the owners of the company, we decided to take the Florida heavyweight belt off Lex Luger and put it on a heel. The plan was to have the switch take place on TV the following week. At a weekend show at a nearby fairground, the heel who was to get the belt deliberately messed up in the ring before going into the finish, leaving out, in effect, the third act of a four-act play. As he hoped, the match bombed. When I called him on it, he smirked and blew me off as if it was no big deal. Would you put a belt on a guy, knowing that doing so gives him more power to thwart your wishes? He essentially disqualified himself from any title consideration, meaning the belt was going to stay on Luger for the time being.

"Part of Gordon's desire to take the belt came from his dislike of Luger. Still a rookie, Luger was a semi-mark who paraded the belt around during

interviews, while adopting an attitude that he was too good, smart, handsome, muscular, etc., to even be bothered to talk to Gordon Solie during an interview. It was annoying, but even though the guy was a mark for himself, we were making money with him, so what could we do?

"When Gordon returned from Tennessee on Tuesday and learned that I wasn't going to take the title from Luger, he instantly looked upon me as a blood enemy, and spent the rest of my time there trying to get me fired. He undermined my authority at every turn and formed a cabal of other disaffected individuals, actually inviting them to house shows in Tampa, where they would stand in the hallway and give me the silent treatment every time I passed them. They soon began lobbying Matsuda. When we had a couple of slow weeks due to having mainly small spot shows to draw with, Matsuda gave me the ax."

While Gordon waited for his counsel to sort out the lawsuit involving Roop, Gordon Solie

Enterprises completed a new agreement to bring four wrestlers to the 1986 Strawberry Festival for an autograph session. He also conducted business with Coast to Coast Advertising in Tampa, acting as a talent supplier for wrestling commercials. In the meantime, Mike Lebron finally tracked down the source of the distribution of video tapes and notified the David Togie Agency about the unlawful use of Gordon's likeness, voice, name, caricature, and/or performances. Evidently, that put an end to Gordon's complaint because he never had to pursue the issue again.

Gordon also was preparing to be the guest announcer in Freeport. Charlie Major, Jr. had received a tremendous amount of requests to bring wrestling back to the island and figured the CWF card would serve as a good test for future events. Others booked early along with Gordon were Lex Luger, Jesse Barr, Kendo Nagasaki, Bob Roop, and Kendall Windham.

In 1986, Gordon again became the host for three

different television programs: Championship Wrestling from Florida, which had undergone a temporary name change to American Championship Wrestling, Continental Championship Wrestling from Birmingham, and a new show in Atlanta called Pro Wrestling This Week [PWTW].

After Championship Wrestling from Georgia was taken over by Jim Crockett, Gordon joined Joe Pedicino as co-host of PWTW. Formerly, Joe was a salesman for Atlanta's WATL-TV, and a ring announcer who came up with the idea for a wrestling show called Superstars of Wrestling. When programming on WATL in another time slot was weak, the station asked Joe to increase his production to include five hours a week of televised professional wrestling. When those five hours proved to be the highest-rated hours on the station, management asked Joe to produce a total of seven hours of programming.

Not wanting to overdo more of the same, Joe

decided to devise a new type of wrestling program. He realized the station was receiving eight tapes of wrestling each week from various promotions, so he decided to produce a show that featured interviews and highlights from matches across the country. Joe also suggested that WATL executives air the new show, Pro Wrestling This Week, on Saturday mornings, and leave the other wrestling programs in their existing time slots. Initially, Joe hosted the programs with his wife, Bonnie Blackstone, but when Joe decided to syndicate PWTW into other television markets, he thought he should get a more recognizable face to join him on the air. That was when he brought in Gordon Solie.

"We'd fly Gordon up every Tuesday, and usually we would tape interviews starting around 11:30 a.m. or noon," said Joe. "I was pretty new to the business, and I found myself looking at him on the set, and thinking to myself, 'Holy crap. I'm sitting here with Gordon Solie.' It was unbelievable because Gordon gave the show instant credibility.

As far as the fans were concerned, if Gordon Solie said it, then it was Gospel. I felt like I had this trustworthy coach, because I learned quickly that Gordon was one of the people I met in the professional wrestling business who had unquestionable integrity. Even in the planning stages, he advised me on segment ideas, as to whether they were good or not, and he was right on the money. His contributions behind the scenes were just as valuable as his commentary on the show."

As Joe worked a little longer with Gordon, he changed the schedule a bit. "Gordon knew more stories than anyone I had ever worked with. Initially, Gordon spent three to four hours working on the show, and then flew back to Tampa. I started changing his return flights to a later time so we could go to lunch and I could listen to him even more. Of course, Gordon liked to have a couple of drinks along with lunch, but even with a drink or two in his system, he was still better than anyone else in the business."

In late November, Gordon received a phone call from his sister, Gaye, informing him that his mother, Luella, was ill, and had been hospitalized in Minneapolis. She was asking for her son. Gordon spoke with her by telephone and made a promise that he would be there. That was the last time they would speak. Luella passed away the next day.

Essential business at hand kept Gordon from his mother's deathbed. He had just signed a contract through Gordon Solie Enterprises to bring wrestlers to the Brevard County Fair, and on the day she died, November 28, 1986, Gordon was in the middle of signing a new contract on behalf of Avcom, Inc. (another company in which Gordon was a stockholder). Upon hearing the news of his mother's death, Gordon immediately dropped all wrestling business and flew alone to Minneapolis, where he joined his sister and her family at the private service which honored the elegant matriarch of the family.

Upon his return to Tampa, he began to fulfill the terms of his new deal. For a payment of $2,100, he agreed to host a video and provide video/camera work through Avcom, Inc. The deal was consummated between Dusty Woods Entertainment and Gordon Solie Enterprises, Inc., and World Pro Wrestling from Japan was produced. The best synopsis of the video came from Gordon's introduction:

> Hello, I'm Gordon Solie. I'm your host for ninety minutes of the most exciting wrestling matches you've ever seen. Here, the clash of East versus West provides the backdrop for some grueling wrestling action, never before seen in North America. From Tokyo, Osaka, from all parts of the Land of the Rising Sun, come recent matches from Japan's number one wrestling alliance. The feuds going on now in Japan, between Americans and Japanese wrestlers, are furious, and we're

going to peek in and see just what's happening. We'll watch Antonio Inoki defend his IWG world title against Dick Murdock. We'll see Chris Adams and the Jackal battle Japan's number-one tag team, Tatsumi Fujinami and Kengo Kimura. We'll watch rising star Kenji Mutoh take on Tony St. Clair, Jimmy Snuka and Don Carras battle Fujinami and Kimura, Inoki and his long time partner, Seiji Sakaguchi, battle head to head with Hacksaw Higgins and Conga the Barbarian. And there's much, much more. ("World Pro Wrestling from Japan")

By December 1986, Gordon finally received an answer from the courts in regard to the affidavit in the case filed against him by the fan at the University of Tampa's Spartan Auditorium. It was Gordon's contention that Gordon Solie Enterprises had no liability for James Gravitt's alleged assault by Roop and Sullivan. The court released Gordon's company from any liability with a verdict of "voluntary dismissal with prejudice."

At the same time, Gordon got some positive recognition by receiving the most votes for favorite announcer in a poll by the magazine Pro Wrestling Illustrated. The voting, according to Peter King, had Gordon on top of the list, followed by Jesse Ventura, Tony Schiavone, Mark Lowrance, Bill Mercer, Larry Nelson, David Crockett, Jim Ross, Vince McMahon, and Gorilla Monsoon. King was surprised, not because Gordon wasn't the best, but because Gordon wasn't as visible as some of the other broadcasters. For the previous two years, he had primarily been on regional shows, like CWF and Continental, while many of the others were on national shows like the WWF, the AWA, or WCW (10).

In the same article for Pro Wrestling Illustrated, King also listed the poll for favorite shows. World Championship Wrestling stood out as number one, ahead of Championship Wrestling [World Class], Power Pro Wrestling [Mid-South], Pro Wrestling USA [AWA], and Prime Time Wrestling [WWF]. The large number of wrestling programs even

included a new show called GLOW [Gorgeous Ladies of Wrestling].

It was a good thing that PWTW was a hit because Gordon's other shows, CWF and Continental, seemed more and more to be dwarfed by the nationally televised shows. The February 16, 1987 edition of Wrestling Observer Newsletter worded it a little differently: "As we've mentioned here several times, Jim Crockett's version of the NWA (I say this because Florida, Continental and Portland, etc. still believe they're the NWA) will be running a big debut tour" (3).

In early March, the Observer reported that the Florida wrestling office was rumored to have had meetings with Jim Crockett, Jr. and Dusty Rhodes. It turned out to be true. Before the March 9 edition of the Wrestling Observer Newsletter went to press, Jim Crockett Promotions had taken control of the Florida wrestling promotion. Gordon was asked to stay on as the announcer.

Gordon also communicated with Steve Beverly, Director of Radio-Television for the Department of Communications at Auburn University, in regard to Beverly's research on subjects like how many violent acts occur during different wrestling programs, and how much actual show time was spent wrestling. Beverly was aware that CWF was under Crockett's control at the time, and the ratings had dipped below those enjoyed by CWF under the old regime. Beverly thought perhaps the decrease in ratings for Crockett's syndicated shows might be due to less actual wrestling per show.

Beverly's findings, which were released to the public later in the year, revealed that Pro Wrestling This Week was atop the list for the amount of actual wrestling per hour with 32 minutes and 8 seconds. The shows produced by the AWA and Deep South Wrestling were close to the top, but World Wide Wrestling and WWF Superstars of Wrestling were down on the bottom, with average wrestling time per hour of 15 minutes, 40 seconds, and 13 minutes, 27 seconds,

respectively (Beverly, Television). It was obvious that WCW and the WWF were not providing wrestling fans with that which they wanted … "wrestling."

In the number of rules broken per hour, World Class Championship Wrestling headed the list with 119.5, and Mid-Southern Championship Wrestling followed closely behind with 111.7. WWF Superstars was much lower with 49.5, only beaten by World Championship Wrestling (the Sunday show) with 39.5 per hour. Mid-Southern Championship Wrestling and Continental Championship Wrestling took the top spots for the number of violent acts per hour.

Continental Championship Wrestling wasn't one of America's biggest promotions, but it was definitely noteworthy. There were memorable performances in Continental, including those by a man who had worked previously with Gordon in Florida. His name was Adrian Street, a wrestler who entered arenas with a painted face and a

colorful ensemble of purple or pink clothing. As he approached the ring, he skipped down the aisles and blew kisses to the crowd. When he first arrived in the territory, fans cheered his entrance, but when Street abused and humiliated his personal valet, Miss Linda, Florida fans quickly turned on him. As the storyline went, Miss Linda's family in Great Britain had been servants of Adrian's family for three generations. Adrian treated her like a servant by making her get on her hands and knees in the ring. Sometimes, he would humiliate her further by stepping on her back. Needless to say, many of the wrestling patrons, particularly women, vented their disapproval of Street's haughty and chauvinistic behavior.

By the time Adrian and Gordon hooked up in Continental, the story had changed a bit. Both Adrian and Miss Linda were royalty. He was a "Lord" and she was "Lady" Linda. They portrayed an arrogant, aristocratic, English couple. In reality, they owned a farm in England and a house which dated back to 1100 A.D. It was implied that

Adrian and Linda's family had interests in the Royal Forest of Dean in Gloucestershire, the same land that provided oak for Henry the Eighth's Royal Fleet. The stage was set for Gordon and Adrian to have some fun.

Adrian began by taking the Southeastern title from Norvell Austin. That set up a mixed tag team match, with Miss Linda as Adrian's partner and lady wrestler Candy Divine as Austin's. Everyone knew Candy could wrestle, but nobody had a clue that Linda, having worked out on the mat with Adrian for years, was a good wrestler in her own right. As the tag team match was under way, Gordon made comments like, "My God, Miss Linda is a ringer. She's like Charles Bronson of 'Hard Times.'" The fans were outraged when Adrian used a piledriver on Candy Divine and pinned her for the win.

When Adrian appeared on television that week with the Southeastern title belt, fans noticed a change in the belt's makeup. Adrian had painted

the leather part of the belt pink. The fans were incensed. After the belt changed hands a couple of times, Adrian showed up on television with his own hand made version of the belt. Of course, it was pink, too. He said it had been specially designed for him by Princess Diana. Again, the fans vented their disapproval.

That was when Gordon came up with an idea to turn up the heat, and make Adrian even more of a heel. Gordon told Adrian he should have an official letter and present it as correspondence that came directly from the Queen of England. When Adrian read the letter to the viewing audience, the Queen's comments revealed that he was honoring Great Britain by winning titles on foreign soil, and bringing culture to the cultural desert of their former colony, the United States of America. Since Adrian was abroad, it also was mentioned that his presence had been missed at the Queen's garden parties, and there was a potential "knighthood" in Adrian's future.

The angle garnered Adrian a lot of heat from the fans. Adrian credited Gordon with the idea for the letter. He also talked highly of Gordon's skill behind the microphone. "Gordon had a knack for taking a so-so match and making it entertaining. He was articulate and he was knowledgeable. If anyone who knows the business ever mentions wrestling announcers, I would be surprised if Gordon Solie wasn't the first name to come up."

Gordon and Adrian also got along well behind the scenes. "Before the interviews in Florida, some guy would bring in handfuls of mini-Jack Daniel bottles to the locker room," said Adrian. "Some were for me and some were for Gordon. Prior to the taped interviews, Gordon and I would have a drink or two."

Despite occasional glimmers of success from Continental and CWF, the new corporate age of wrestling was gaining a foothold in the industry. Gordon always contended that the "good old days" of wrestling would be back. It may have only been

for one event, but "old time" wrestling was returning to Florida. Plans were made for a special card, the Eddie Graham Memorial Benefit, to be held at the Bayfront Center in St. Petersburg. The event had three men at the microphones: Gordon Solie, Steve Keirn, and Coach John Heath. Gordon received letters of support for the event from U.S. Congressmen Bill Young and Michael Bilirakis.

In front of a full house of 9,000 fans, Dusty Rhodes beat Ric Flair by disqualification. On the same card, the Road Warriors and their opponents, Rick Rude and Manny Fernandez, were all disqualified. Other participants included Mike Rotundo, Kevin Sullivan, Ed Ganter, Barry Windham, Samu, Dory Funk, Jr., Steve Keirn, Stan Lane, and the Mod Squad.

The show definitely reminded Gordon of the old days, other than the fact that his expense check came from Jim Crockett Promotions in Charlotte. For 37 years, his paychecks for ring announcing, public relations work, and television broadcasting

for Florida wrestling, had come from Tampa. The feeling Gordon had for a return to the "good old days" was definitely fading.

In early June 1987, Gordon received more distressing news. His long-time friend and racing associate, Johnny Hicks, had passed away from lung cancer and emphysema. The world around Gordon was changing rapidly. His friends were all passing away and his career was undergoing a massive upheaval. In his Morning After column, Tom McEwen explained how the wrestling saga had changed:

> There are no more regular Tuesday night shows in Tampa. The reasons are many. Costs went up and admission prices couldn't considering the customer demographics. Then came the Vince McMahon-New York phenomenon, the hiring of a public relations firm that developed a scheme he followed,

big national TV shows now and then for the big bucks. Wrestlers were lured away from communities such as this and it badly hurt the local producers, however good or bad that may be. McMahon now puts on an hour-and-a-half show in place of NBC's Saturday Night Live once a month. It has fine ratings … (9C)

J Michael Kenyon shared the same opinion as Tom McEwen in regard to wrestling talent moving away from the Tampa market by the third quarter of 1987:

McMahon's national/international promotion had by then succeeded in finishing off most all of the regional/territorial promotions by the simple fact of attracting most of the major talent (and by producing the slickest television programs ever seen by wrestling fans, which by comparison made the old CWF-style "studio" shows look cheap and

tawdry). People inside the business, in my opinion, neglected to realize that the major lure of professional wrestling was the sizzle, not the steak. It wasn't so much what was going on inside the ring, or the angles, that attracted the throngs. It was the excitement inherent in the entire package. So, as WWF television flooded the North American markets, and McMahon's big arena shows came right behind, the effect was to dampen crowd enthusiasm in the "territories," and to reduce the size of the regional promotions' crowds. And with smaller crowds, in what had become larger buildings (to wit: Hesterly Armory to Sun Dome), the sizzle was a helluva lot less enticing. The sizzle got muffled, in other words. About all that remained behind, and remains behind today, are the relatively few fans who get real kicks out of the stagecraft (made increasingly more insane to compensate for the overall diminution of the total experience).

The only other organization which appeared to be able to compete with McMahon at the time was Jim Crockett Promotions. Whenever McMahon promoted a big house show, Crockett would book one nearby in the same area. Crockett rapidly expanded with national tours and syndicated television programs, new efforts which cost a lot of money and resulted in cutbacks. One of the cutbacks was the salary for the CWF announcers. When Crockett asked Gordon to do "52 shows for the price of 26," Gordon was insulted and angry, so he quit. Gordon's run of hosting the same television program for 27 consecutive years came to an end on August 26, 1987 when he cleaned out his locker at the Sportatorium in Tampa. According to Tom McEwen, angry viewers made phone calls to the Tampa Tribune for two weeks in a row when they tuned in to CWF to find Steve Keirn handling Gordon's normal microphone duties … and Gordon Solie nowhere to be found.

For some relief, Gordon perused his fan mail, a task he really enjoyed. He always said it was

important to listen to the fans because they were "the lifeblood of the wrestling business." One man, after seeing a couple of articles about Gordon in the newspapers, wrote that he enjoyed Gordon's "dead-pan, gravel-voiced, announcing style." Gordon thought one line in the letter was priceless: "Incidentally, I recall very clearly representing your first wife when you two agreed to disagree." He was, in fact, Betty's attorney when Gordon's first marriage was dissolved.

Buddy Colt left the show before Gordon, and recalled the events leading up to the eventual demise of CWF. Originally, Duke Keomuka, one of the shareholders in the CWF promotion, made a deal with Crockett to work together. It was agreed that Dusty would be the booker and Crockett would promote the events. Everyone thought it would be a great partnership, including stockholders like Buddy, Duke, Hiro Matsuda, and Dusty. Everything ran smoothly for awhile … until CWF began to have problems collecting revenue from the house shows. The gate receipts were

turned in to Crockett, but that's where it ended. No money was sent back to Florida. After a meeting, the Florida stockholders voted to make some changes with the way they did business. At the conclusion of the following week's show in Miami, they brought all the box office money back to Tampa. Obviously, Crockett called Duke Keomuka and complained about not receiving the proceeds from the gate. Duke explained that CWF had to pay the wrestlers, Gordon Solie, and operating expenses of the Sportatorium. Keomuka also claimed CWF was so broke that the power company had threatened to turn off the electricity at the Sportatorium. That further damaged the already strained relationship between Crockett Promotions and CWF. Buddy Colt summed up the whole situation: "Crockett fu–ed Championship Wrestling from Florida."

Under Crockett's direction, Championship Wrestling from Florida ceased to exist within a couple of months after Gordon's departure. Jerry Prater, who had relocated further north in Florida,

also had been associated with the show since its inception, and still maintained many roles with Tampa wrestling. Ring announcing in some of the smaller venues and occasionally in Jacksonville were part of his company duties. Jerry also published the "Grapevine," the program sold at wrestling arenas throughout the territory. Like Gordon, Jerry's duties and his long career with CWF came to an abrupt end.

In describing his long time co-worker, Jerry stated, "If someone mentions the name 'Gordon Solie,' the first thing I think about is the fact that I had a great working relationship with Gordon; but even now, in just about any conversation on the subject of wrestling, people are familiar with the name, Gordon Solie. Dusty Rhodes would be jealous."

Jerry added, "Everybody in the business appreciated Gordon. I've seen and heard a number of other wrestling commentators, but none could top Gordon Solie. Cowboy, Eddie, and the boys

knew that, and knew it well. Eddie was particularly insistent on having matches treated like a legitimate, competitive sport. And while that wasn't difficult when you had Lou Thesz vs. Dory Funk, Jr., sometimes Gordon had to describe wrestling that was inferior. One of the things Gordon did best was to make a really lousy match sound like something was really happening. He could add that much to a dull set of circumstances with his narration."

Scott Teal made comments along those same lines. "When people talk about Gordon Solie, the things they mention the most often were his ability to paint a picture of a match, his knowledge of wrestling holds, and his mastery of the English language. What struck me the most, however, was his ability to get the wrestlers over, regardless of how much or how little talent they had. In the 1960s and 1970s, television matches usually pitted a main-event wrestler against a preliminary (I hate the term 'jobber') wrestler. Naturally, everyone always expected the main-event guy to win the

match. To me, when it came to losing matches, the one guy who always comes to my mind first is Pepe Gomez. Gomez never won a match, even when pitted against another wrestler at the same level. However, when Gomez wrestled on TV against somebody like Jack Brisco, Gordon called the match in such a way that made the viewers really believe that Gomez had a chance to win. When the match was over, Gordon left the fans thinking that Brisco had beaten a tough, legitimate competitor."

Jack Brisco recalled a story about Leroy McGuirk, the blind wrestling promoter of the Oklahoma territory. "Leroy made one of the best statements about Gordon that I ever heard. After he heard Gordon call a match, he said, 'I'm absolutely blind, and yet, Gordon Solie made me see that wrestling match.' Gordon was unsurpassed when it came to announcing the wrestling matches."

Meanwhile, the Continental Championship

Wrestling promotion also was having problems. Gordon received several letters from people who complained about the lack of live cards and the short duration of the matches. He had concerns about the longevity of the Continental promotion, but continued to fly to Birmingham on Mondays. He was still making trips to Atlanta on Tuesdays for Pro Wrestling This Week, as well. PWTW was a hot commodity, and the show was being aired in major markets such as New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. The local CWF alumni were able to see Gordon on a regular basis because PWTW aired in Tampa, as well.

As usual, Gordon had other irons in the fire. He still had Gordon Solie Enterprises and his ownership in Avcom. At the time, he also was considering a contract offer from Global Wrestling Alliance in Boca Raton, and was involved with yet another company, Sports Entertainment International, LTD. Mike Lebron and Phil Leto, founders of the company with Gordon, encouraged him to release the Gordon Solie Championship

Wrestling Trivia game. Each game came with 300 cards which included questions from four categories: Wrestling History, General Information, Wrestling of the ‘80s, and True or False. Players of the game advanced game pieces around a board when they answered questions correctly.

Gordon hoped their game would get as hot as wrestling itself, particularly the televised programs which aired in the Atlanta market. Viewers there could watch 22 wrestling programs weekly, which added up to 31 hours each week. Joe Pedicino still produced nine of the 31 hours with shows that aired on Fridays from seven to nine p.m., Saturdays from ten a.m. to noon, and Saturdays from ten p.m. to three a.m.

Gordon was excited about the development of new wrestling promotions in Florida, and decided to concentrate his efforts solely in the Sunshine State. At the end of October 1987, Gordon was still negotiating with Global Wrestling Alliance.

Dr. Michael P. Brannon [Dr. Red Roberts], president of the company, and Bob Roop, vice president and booker, headed up the company. In 1987, Global became the first publicly traded wrestling company with seven million shares of stock hitting the market at an initial offering of 40 cents per share. With several shows already taped, they made deals with TV stations in Miami, Jacksonville and Pensacola to air the tapes.

The Sunshine State was primed for a new wrestling outfit. When Crockett controlled CWF, the number of house shows in Florida dropped from 20 to 25 a month down to around 12. To make matters worse, fans complained that prices for live cards had gone up so much that they could no longer afford to attend. Florida wrestling fans welcomed the idea of another home-based wrestling promotion, particularly one that would provide affordable shows at large and small venues alike.

In a letter dated October 23, 1987, Global named

Gordon as director chairman of the board and vice president. A follow-up letter on October 29, however, said he would be named vice president of sports promotion. His duties would include functioning as a co-promoter and lead point man for all GWA events, assisting in clearing TV stations throughout Florida, negotiating with talent, obtaining advertising sponsors, participating in the production of GWA Wrestling Academy, helping with production of the GWA promotional sales tape, and providing his full endorsement of GWA and GWA Wrestling Academy. Gordon's compensation would consist of $1,000, payable bi-monthly, for each GWA TV tape produced, on which he acted as the announcer, plus 10 percent of the net from GWA house shows in which he participated as co-promoter. They also entered a provision in which Gordon would participate in the GWA stock option plan.

By November 1987, Gordon and Global Wrestling Alliance agreed on a contract that clearly outlined his duties with the company.

Things didn't work out as promised. On December 16, Gordon's attorney sent a letter to Global claiming that since November 1, Gordon had only been paid $2,167. Furthermore, the payment had been ten days late. Two follow-up letters in the same month failed to resolve the problems between the two parties. Gordon's attorney also said Gordon had secured the services of C.M. Crist, who "will be responsible for, and is needed, to secure secondary buildings."

They also asked for a change to Gordon's already-agreed-upon compensation package. In addition to the 10 percent of all house shows in Florida as agreed, they wanted; a) five percent of all gross proceeds from overseas distribution and networking of any given videotape(s) or tape(s) in which Gordon Solie or his voice, caricature, image, or likeness appears, and; b) Fifteen percent of all gross proceeds from any videotape(s) or tape(s) in which Gordon Solie or his voice, caricature, image, or likeness appears that is/are syndicated or networked outside the state of

Florida, but within the United States.

On January 6, 1988, Dr. Red Roberts sent a letter to Gordon in response to the three letters he had received from Gordon's attorney, claiming that Gordon's participation had "fallen far short of the mark":

> You have failed to clear any television stations on behalf of GWA and, at best, you have telephoned seven stations and have visited less than half of that number personally.
> Your efforts in the areas of talent recruitment and video production have been minimal to date.
> C.M. Crist was hired as a result of my personal contact with Eric Embry of World Class Wrestling, and was in no way a result of your efforts.
> Despite a clear and concise letter of intent

which we met all of your requirements, the terms of which were further memorialized in the final contract (with all issues resolved, but not executed), your attorney has continued in each of his letters to suggest that there are still on-going negotiations. May we remind you of the fact that you were fully compensated during the two-week period of inactivity due to your supposed re-negotiations.

The most recent correspondence of December 30, 1987 adds insult to injury by your introduction of all new, never before presented or discussed percentages of compensation for overseas and outside the state of Florida GWA activities.

GWA agreed to all of your considerable salary demands because we perceived you as an integral part of the GWA team. Since that time, however, I have become extremely concerned and disappointed in your job performance. While emphatically stating to me on various occasions that you did not want

to be "... just an announcer for GWA," your role has been self-delegated to that sole function.

Brannon devoted the remainder of the letter to reminding Gordon of the points they had agreed to at their initial meeting in Boca Raton, which included arranging press parties to announce Gordon's return to Florida wrestling, clearing various television stations (Gordon had mentioned five to seven), providing coverage of GWA on the Pro Wrestling This Week program, and locating local promoters and venues to stage GWA house shows. Brannon closed by saying Gordon had either not attempted, or failed to complete those tasks "after a meager initial effort."

On January 11, three days after a conversation between the two parties, Brannon sent a letter accepting Gordon's suggestion that he be "... a voice on the tape only." Every two weeks, Gordon would be required to host television tapings that consisted of two live shows, for which Gordon

would be paid $1,000 per taping. In addition, they would pay him $250 for live appearances at house shows and reimburse him for reasonable expenses incurred as a result of GWA-related business.

Things just didn't work out for Gordon with the Global Wrestling Alliance. Bob Roop, who became highly involved with Global, told the entire story in a 2008 interview. "After being canned by Matsuda, I found myself at loose ends. Hiro gave me some severance pay, so I decided to take some time off. I had worked in the business steadily for fifteen years, so the idea of just taking it easy for a while appealed to me. At the time, my wife Molly and I were living in Brandon, a small town on the outskirts of Tampa. I had discovered a nearby natural spring, with crystal-clear, refreshingly cold water, and spent several days a week sunbathing at the spring, while also working out at a gym in downtown Brandon.

"Several months passed, and I discovered that I enjoyed being off the road, but financial concerns

in regard to lack of income loomed. While working out at the gym one day, I saw Larry Simon, aka The Great Malenko, jogging on the indoor track. We had fallen out in the aftermath of the failed hostile takeover of Fuller's promotion in Knoxville, but several years had passed and Larry responded to my greeting. He was somewhat reserved, but had a reason to talk to me.

"He was running the wrestling school for the Global Wrestling Alliance, commuting on weekends from his home in Tampa to south Florida to do so, and had been with them from the beginning. He had seen Patrick Schaffer mismanage the wrestling company, in the process blowing almost half of the $700,000 raised by the original IPO, with only two hours of TV production to show for it. I think Larry saw his job and income slipping away, and, regardless of any personal feelings/animosity he might have had toward me, knew that I had experienced success as a booker. He suggested that I talk to Red Roberts and see about going to work in that capacity for

GWA. Having had six months off by this time, I was ready to go back to work, mainly due to a need for income, so I acted on Larry's suggestion.

"After meeting in Boca Raton in South Florida with Red and the board of charlatans at Integrated Business Company, the parent company to GWA and fifteen other companies, I was hired as booker and vice president of GWA, and also given a meaningless title as President of the Global Wrestling Academy.

"Global was a mess. Schaffer had swerved/schmoozed his way through a year of high salary, perks, etc., with nothing to show for it except two hours of televised wrestling. Though inexperienced with the dynamic of running a wrestling company, Mike Brannon, aka Dr. Red Roberts, is extremely intelligent. He was already aware that someone with experience and working knowledge of how to run a wrestling promotion was needed if GWA was to have a chance to succeed.

"We soon became fast friends and worked hard for the entire time we were with GWA to make the company a going concern. For the original two hours of TV taping, they had, for name recognition, hired some castoffs from the WWF, and these dudes were still around. Even so, there was no revenue being produced, and all expenses, including our salaries, came from funds raised by the initial IPO. With no guarantee of being able to raise additional revenue through another stock offering, Red and I did our planning on the premise that the 350+K remaining from the original offering was what we had to work with. Therefore, there were not funds to hire any established talent. Feeling that the only means we had to generate revenue was a weekly TV show, that's where we decided to focus our efforts — with the idea of using the TV exposure to develop our own talent from scratch.

"While limited in terms of hiring established wrestlers, we did have the means to hire a known face to be our announcer. Who was the best-known

announcer in the state of Florida — also available due to not being under contract or obligation to any other Florida wrestling company? Gordon Solie.

"In spite of my dislike/disrespect for Gordon, I suggested him to Red because it made sense to do so. His name was synonymous with pro wrestling in Florida and I felt it would give our fledgling company instant credibility. Our primary object was to make GWA a success, and if that meant working with Gordon to accomplish that goal, no problem.

"Because I was the only one in our organization who knew him, I called him at his home in Tampa, gave him a short version of what I was after, and set up a meeting with him. My wife Molly and his wife Smoky had met and liked one another during our time in Tampa with CWF, so Gordon asked us to have dinner with the two of them at his home the next weekend.

"We arrived shortly after five o'clock in the

afternoon to find Gordon well into his cups. He and I had some preliminary discussion before dinner, but his passing out and plopping face first into his dinner entrée rendered any further talks impossible. We got past this small incident, and shortly thereafter, Gordon came to South Florida to meet with us.

"Intent on creating and forming a successful promotional team, I had not poisoned the well with Red, keeping my former dealings with Gordon to myself, meaning to keep a close eye on him if we were able to strike a deal to work together. At the conclusion of our first meeting, upon Gordon's departure, I asked Red for his reaction. He said, 'I don't like him.'

"At the meeting, Gordon had used his TV persona, projecting himself as the avuncular, erudite, charming, fellow who TV viewers had watched for decades. Unlike most wrestlers who are young in the business, Red was not star struck, and Gordon's fame meant nothing to him. When I

asked Red why he didn't like Gordon, he said, 'Bob, he's a nasty guy.' At the time, Red had recently completed his degree requirements to become a Doctor of Psychology, and he was certainly more capable of analyzing someone than most of us. His reaction was interesting to me because, during the meeting, I had watched Gordon try to get himself over with Red, who would be the person deciding on any future employment for Gordon.

"Having seen another, completely different side, of Gordon, I watched in bemusement as he cloaked the bitter, vicious, personality I had experienced behind the warm TV persona he had projected for so many years. Already impressed with Red's smarts, after hearing his initial impression of Gordon, I also gained admiration for his perception.

"At our initial meeting, Gordon acted as if his joining with GWA would guarantee success for the wrestling company. He told us of being on a first-

name basis with program directors, selectors of what airs and what doesn't, at every major TV station in Florida. Supposedly, this personal connection would easily get any TV wrestling show featuring him as announcer aired on each station. This was a major deal!

"With our major need being to generate revenue through running shows, while also being aware that our available funds were dwindling, this was exactly what we needed to happen. Balancing the time we knew it would take to create interest in a new wrestling company with the money we had to draw from during that time, Gordon's claim to placement of our TV show was exactly what we needed to happen if GWA was to make it over the hump and succeed.

"Gordon made many other claims. He stated that his personal connections with news media around, not just Florida, but the entire south, and, to a lesser degree, the entire country, would allow us, through him, to bring the GWA name to public

attention in a major way. Being able to schedule series of press conferences to promote GWA was also something he could easily cause to happen.

"There was no way to know if Gordon's claims had any merit, but his background and local/national TV exposure for many years certainly gave credence to his claims, and we decided to hire his services. Because he lived in Tampa and worked out of his home, there was no way to directly monitor his efforts toward the betterment of GWA. Indeed, once under contract, instead of going to work on our behalf, he spent most of his time having his attorney pose a series of complaints about the contract he had signed.

"On a personal note: what comes around goes around. It wasn't too much later that I had the personal pleasure (with Red Roberts) of giving treacherous Gordon Solie the axe."

When Gordon left the Global show, he was replaced by Frank Abbondolo. A short time later,

the board members of Frankel Capital Mgmt., Inc, Global Wrestling Alliance, and Micro Cellular, Inc. voted to merge into Integrated Business Corporation in exchange for stock.

Gordon's continuing plans to work strictly in Florida led to a big surprise. His April 2, 1988 appearance on Pro Wrestling This Week shocked the television viewing audience. During the show, Paul E. Dangerously was introduced as a new executive for PWTW. One of his first "official" duties in that capacity was to fire Gordon Solie … on the air. Joe Pedicino said Gordon was magnificent and that the show was a classic. "After Paul E. Dangerously fired Gordon, Gordon's comeback was amazing. It was the best 'screw you, Paul E. Dangerously' ever. Gordon left the show with class, but scorched wrestling on his way out."

Viewers couldn't believe anyone would treat Gordon Solie with so much disrespect, and responded with complaints to the station. They

were furious, and let the station know they despised Paul E. Dangerously for treating Gordon Solie in such a fashion. Joe Pedicino said, "We finally had to tell some of the callers that it was just a work. More than anything, Gordon was tired, and he needed to stop the business traveling for a while. Still, we continued to get people in and out of the business questioning us. Finally, we asked Gordon to make a statement. Not wanting to divulge too much, Gordon said something like, 'Come on guys, this is pro wrestling.' It was a shame to see him go because he was the consummate professional, and I never met a broadcaster who knew more about his product than Gordon. The show was still doing well at the time, but it had reached its peak."

Parting with Pro Wrestling This Week wasn't the only change looming in Gordon's career at the time. The trips to Birmingham for Continental Championship Wrestling were beginning to lose their luster, as well. "Downtown" Bruno Lauer spoke about the transformation in Alabama:

"Originally, I was scheduled for an interview with Gordon. I didn't get there in time to speak with him before the show, so our first meeting occurred during an interview. His reputation preceded him, and, I must admit, I felt somewhat intimidated. Still, I decided to maintain my persona. After Gordon gave me a nice introduction, I came back with something like, 'Let's get one thing straight, Solie. We're not friends.' Gordon understood the business and the fact that I was simply staying in character. We had a nice conversation following the show. After that, we met at the Radisson for a couple of drinks and cigarettes when he flew in on Mondays. Then we'd go do the show. That was fine with the Fullers, but things changed when they sold out to David Woods. He brought in Jack Curtis to run things and added Eddie Gilbert as the booker. Curtis started giving Gordon a bunch of crap about his drinking, and started talking about replacing Gordon with Charlie Platt. All of a sudden, Gordon was gone. He was definitely missed because we had established a good, smooth-working relationship."

Gordon was ready for a break, anyway, and he really needed a vacation. He cashed in some frequent-flyer miles and, along with Smoky, he headed to Europe. One of the highlights was a chance for Gordon to see his friend, Bill Morris, in England. The journey would not have been complete without a visit to Morris' racetrack.

Near the end of May 1988, Gordon, deposited funds into the bank account of Florida Championship Wrestling, Inc., a company he formed with Steve Keirn and Mike Graham. For the local market in Tampa, a deal was made initially to air FCW (Florida Championship Wrestling) on WFTS CH-28. Since WFTS did not have an adequate studio for filming wrestling matches, a unique arrangement was made. FCW leased a studio from WEDU Ch-3, the local PBS station. Having secured a location in which to produce a show, Greg Solie was chosen to be the director and Bob Hoak was the technical director.

Since it was difficult to finance enough studio

time during the early production days, Gordon flew to Memphis on Saturdays to film part of the FCW show. It also gave Gordon an opportunity to work again with Bruno Lauer. "I did some interviews in Memphis with Gordon after we finished Lawler's show for Channel 5," stated Bruno. "I didn't even charge Gordon because he was trying to get the new Florida show up and running. It was actually quite a work because people who watched the FCW show thought that I was in Florida. Although I appeared on the televised programs generated in the Sunshine State, I was never actually down there for any of those programs."

To help get the new FCW off the ground, Gordon, Keirn, and Graham headed to the Bahamas. Upon their arrival, Steve was shocked at the number of cigarettes Gordon had brought with him. He had four cartons, and they were only going to be gone for a couple of days. Steve and Gordon shared a room, which was fine, until Steve tried to get some sleep. His roommate sat up late, chain-smoking, and watching TV. The sound was blaring

to the point of shattering eardrums, and the programs were all in Spanish. Steve rolled over and asked Gordon, "Do you speak Spanish?”

"No.”

"Then why the fu– are you watching that show?" belted out Steve.

"I want to hear the commentary for the boxing matches," Gordon calmly stated.

Steve cut loose again. "Why in the hell is it so loud?”

Gordon came back with, "It’s really good broadcasting.”

Realizing that he was fighting a losing battle, Steve rolled over and tried to get some sleep.

When he returned to Florida, Gordon appeared on WFLA’s Sports Huddle radio show with host Tedd Webb. The program aired live from the

Champions Sports Lounge in the Marriott Hotel, which was located on the corner of Cyprus Street and Westshore Boulevard in Tampa. With FCW wrestling matches scheduled to be held at the Florida State Fairgrounds the next evening, it was good publicity and a great way to get fans involved. Prizes like the Gordon Solie Trivia Game, and hats with the Champions' logos, were awarded to callers who answered trivia questions correctly. Others phoned in to ask questions of Gordon, Tedd, or the FCW wrestlers on hand.

Mike Graham and Steve Keirn were interviewed and stayed around afterwards to talk with fans. At one point in the show, Tedd Webb mentioned that Gordon was repeatedly referred to as the best professional wrestling announcer in history. Referring to the changes the NWA and Jim Crockett made in Tampa, Tedd said to Gordon, "The NWA gave you about eighteen inches of garden hose." Gordon knew exactly what Tedd meant, and responded with, "There was no benefit of any lubricant, either."

The new company, FCW, moved forward with house shows at the Charles M. Davis Special Events Center on the Florida State Fairgrounds, but it was small potatoes by comparison to the events and shows that Gordon hosted in the past.

Besides his diminishing role as a broadcaster, things weren't run smoothly at home, either. At one time, Smoky enjoyed toasting a few with her husband, but had since become a card-carrying member of an Al-Anon support group. Gordon's inability to control his drinking had become overwhelming for Smoky, and she found comfort speaking to other women who shared similar circumstances. The group meetings gave Smoky a sense of relief in knowing she was not alone. What she couldn't understand, however, was the reason why Gordon was always unhappy. She thought his excessive drinking might stem from the fact that he couldn't escape or accept his past. Whether he was dealing with problems in his childhood, his failings with his children, or other problems, Smoky could not break through the sad barrier that

seemed to envelop Gordon. She grew weary of their constant arguments and his hostile behavior. His sarcastic and demeaning remarks, which usually came to the forefront when he was drinking heavily, would cut right to her soul. Regardless of his reasons, she was powerless to help him.

"Those types of comments from Smoky," said Bob Allyn, "seemed to fit right into my perception of Gordon's personality traits because I thought of him as a 'perfectionist.' It was obvious that he loved Smoky. They had a lot of great times together, but the atmosphere changed when Gordon was beating himself up mentally. The same perfectionist traits that drove Gordon to become the best broadcaster in his field also made him highly susceptible to alcohol and tobacco abuse, and allowed him to succumb to feelings of depression and guilt. When he became frustrated over what he considered to be a personal failure, he would give Smoky and people close to him a severe tongue lashing.

"Gordon was particularly emotional in 1988. Part of the reason was due to the collapse of CWF the year before, but it went beyond that. He became involved with FCW in the hopes of bringing Florida wrestling back into the headlines, just like it had been in the good old days. However, being a new company, everything wasn't yet in its 'perfect' place. A certain amount of disarray is expected with most new ventures, but that part of the business development was extremely frustrating for Gordon. Even so, he was willing to go through the organizational stage in hopes of re-establishing professional wrestling in Florida."

One of the biggest wrestling stories of the year came out of Atlanta. After negotiating for months, Ted Turner bought Jim Crockett Promotions' failing interests in the wrestling business and formed a new company called Universal Wrestling Corporation. The name was soon changed back to World Championship Wrestling in order to receive the benefit of the name recognition. It was the end of more than fifty years in the wrestling business

for the Crockett family, whose company had gobbled up many other companies over the years. One such promotion was a revived Bill Watts endeavor. In 1985, after losing his air time for Mid-South Wrestling, Watts was back on the air in 1986 and went national under a new name, Universal Wrestling Federation. The program featured a rising star named Jim Ross as its lead broadcaster. During hard times in 1987, Watts sold out to Crockett. Much like Championship Wrestling from Florida, Universal Wrestling Federation just withered away under Crockett's watch, while he concentrated on his NWA television program and house show tours.

Vince McMahon also received attention from the media when a spokesperson from the WWF testified in front of the New Jersey Senate. According to Peter Kerr of the New York Times: "The World Wrestling Federation asks in the legislation that 'professional wrestling' be defined as 'an activity in which participants struggle hand-in-hand, primarily for the purpose of providing

entertainment, rather than conducting a bona-fide athletic contest'" ("Wrestlers"). The bill passed just like previous requests in Delaware and Connecticut. Under the new law, pro wrestlers were no longer required to submit to physical examinations before matches, and the state would not have to license pro wrestlers, promoters, referees, or timekeepers.

When Turner bought out Jim Crockett, Gordon hoped some of Crockett's workers might head to Florida, and that's exactly what happened. By the end of January 1989, Dusty Rhodes and Dick Murdock were back in Florida, along with Al Perez, who canceled out of a world title match with Ric Flair. Perez, who had food poisoning at the time, had contractual problems with WCW, and stated to Jimmy Nasella at the Tampa Tribune that he was tired of traveling 3,000 to 5,000 miles a week.

Rhodes bought controlling interest in FCW and formed Pro Wrestling Federation [PWF] in

partnership with Randy Roberts. Another change took place as FCW began to appear on WTOG CH-44 on Sunday afternoons, the station that previously aired Championship Wrestling from Florida. House shows were set up for the Bayfront Center, the fairgrounds in Tampa, and in Sarasota, Sebring, Ocala, and the Sportatorium in Tampa. The souvenir programs sold at the different venues gave Gordon another source to place ads for Avcom services and his wrestling trivia game.

Without the announcing duties for Continental Championship Wrestling or Pro Wrestling This Week, it was the first time since 1973 that Gordon wasn't regularly traveling outside of Florida to broadcast television programs. Instead, he had time for other interests.

Gordon worked to get FCW into new television markets, in addition to those already established in California, Florida and Canada. He took time to read a ten-page article called Gladiatorial Origins of Professional Wrestling. Gordon's copy had a

note attached from the author, Chris Hunter, which read, "Dear Mr. Solie, Here is a little article I wrote up for one of the wrestling magazines. Thought you might enjoy reading it, since I learned most of it from you."

Gordon also continued to offer his assistance to those in need. He met a shy 12-year-old boy named Shannon Rose, who suffered from Ehlers Danlos syndrome, a condition which affected the muscular and neurological parts of the boy's body. Because of his illness, Shannon had suffered paralysis in both arms, which made him dependent on others, and kept him away from the friendships and activities normally enjoyed by pre-teenagers. Throughout the trials of his illness, Shannon watched Gordon and the wrestlers on television and developed a passion for the sport. He dreamed about meeting the wrestlers, and even envisioned working beside them in some capacity.

As time passed, the young man began to gain partial use of his arms, and he still longed to be a

part of the wrestling business. Gordon Solie and Make-A-Wish Foundation made it happen. When Shannon was brought to the Sportatorium office to write for the wrestling souvenir program, he couldn't believe his good fortune. The next thing he knew, Gordon handed him a crisp five-dollar bill. Rose never parted with that five-dollar bill, and he never forgot Gordon, either, for that was the beginning of his association with professional wrestling.

Shannon remembered Dusty Rhodes' return to Florida, and the kickoff for the PWF with an event called The Homecoming, which was held on March 11, 1989. Dusty gave it the nickname of "Flamingo Madness" because the Sportatorium in Tampa had been painted pink during wrestling's absence. Gordon was joined by "Diamond" Dallas Page as co-host, and in between matches, the program broke away for promos and interviews with Gil Cabot, actress Kim Devane, and PWF president Randy Roberts.

Jim Backlund and Lou Perez opened the show in a junior heavyweight match that ended with a draw decision by referee Mickey "J." Periodic spots ran to advertise the upcoming show booked for March 24, 1989 at the Bayfront Center. Terry Funk made his entrance for a match against Dustin "The Natural" Rhodes and immediately infuriated the crowd. He shouted at the fans, kicked over chairs, and destroyed a big "Dustin Rhodes" picket-style sign that he took from a fan. After the fan reached under the ropes to retrieve what was left of his sign, Funk stomped on the guy's arm a few times. As the match got under way, Funk got a hold of Dustin (standing on the mat just outside the ropes) and pulled him over the ropes into the ring using a vertical suplex (or "su-play," as Gordon called the maneuver). Funk's manager, Sir Oliver Humperdink, then attached a chain to Dustin's ankle and used it to hoist Dustin's leg up toward the ropes at a 45-degree angle. With Dustin horizontal on the canvas and Humperdink keeping him secured with the chain, Funk repeatedly smashed Dustin's knee with a chair. The referee

disqualified Funk, but Funk continued to beat on Dustin until the Nasty Boys and the Italian Stallion came to the rescue.

During an interview afterwards, Kim Devane asked Funk why he had gone to such lengths to brutalize Dustin. Terry said he was really trying to embarrass Dusty in order to get him into the ring for a match. In an attempt to further goad Dusty, Funk referred to him as “a blown-up marshmallow … a blown-up marshmallow in a microwave.”

The legendary Dick Clark made a taped appearance when the show aired, thanking the fans for watching the "Homecoming," and Clark credited the show’s sponsors. In the main event, Dusty Rhodes took on the 384-pound "Big Steel Man" to determine the first ever PWF Heavyweight champion. Dusty got the pin and the victory, but paid dearly for it after the match when Diamond Dallas Page, Humperdink, Bam Bam Bigelow, and the Big Steel Man all swarmed Rhodes in the ring and beat on him. Steve Keirn

and Dick Slater finally chased the "bad guys" away. The show, produced and directed by Greg Solie, featured some great talent and direction. At final count, some 2,500 fans bought tickets to the event. It appeared that the FCW shows, under the sanctioning body of PWF, were off to a great beginning.

After the "Homecoming," Gordon accepted an invitation for yet another interview. A new radio station in Sebring, WWTK AM-730, incorporated a show called Let's Talk Sports with Tony Buono. When the station's affiliate, Highlands Media Company, contacted Gordon, he agreed to a brief interview on the program, followed by a Q&A.

Another change in radio which was taking place in the Tampa Bay area involved one of Gordon's friends, Michael Lebron. He began calling in regularly to a talk show at a Pinellas Park radio station. Known only as "Lionel," he was one of the most outrageous and most annoying callers the station ever had. They would ban him from calling

at times, and then later, let him back on the air. On many occasions, "Lionel" even spoke in dialects, like a Latin American, a rabbi, or a hillbilly (Ross 1F), or portrayed different characters, such as Francis Lionel "Lion" Delbuchi, the character played by Al Pacino in the movie Scarecrow.

WFLA Radio in Tampa became aware of "Lionel" and brought him in for a tryout as host of a Sunday afternoon program. A few months later, WFLA found itself in need of a host for a nine a.m. to noon talk show. They brought him back and, in no time at all, he was a hit (Ross 2F). He was so successful that he later left Tampa to host his own nationally syndicated radio talk show in New York City, and, subsequently, made appearances on major networks like CNN. Like Chuck Shepherd, Lionel liked to use big words, and frequently traded them back and forth with Gordon.

Gordon stayed busy handling publicity and broadcasts for FCW. The show was seen on television in Tampa, Miami, Jacksonville,

Melbourne, Daytona, Perry, Atlanta, Greensboro, Paducah (Kentucky), Nassau, and on two cable networks, CTN in New Jersey and KBU in Malibu, California. On April 29, the promotion held a show at the Tampa Fairgrounds, and on May 6, Homecoming II was held in Miami. Unfortunately, the success of Homecoming I wasn't repeated as less than 800 fans attended the follow-up event, which featured Dusty Rhodes against Terry Funk in a "Texas Death Match."

More public interviews were held by Gordon but it didn't seem to matter how much effort he put into promoting the company. House show attendance dropped after the first couple of weeks. Cities like Fort Lauderdale and Orlando, which drew 3,000 to 4,000 people every week during the heyday of Championship Wrestling from Florida, were drawing less than 150 people each week. To make matters worse, Dusty pulled out in late May and made his first appearance with the WWF on May 29.

Gordon could see that without a large infusion of cash, FCW didn't appear to be bound for glory. Dusty and Gordon had a lot of good times together in the business, but the FCW experience wasn't one of them. Although Gordon was extremely angry that Dusty left so abruptly, he kept that to himself. If someone inquired publicly about Dusty, Gordon had plenty of positive CWF memories to share. He could go on and on about Dusty's "charisma." He also knew that it had been a good career move for Dusty to jump to the WWF. Throughout the later years of his life, however, Gordon privately harbored resentment about Dusty's role in the demise of FCW and the Crockett take-over of CWF. With all his other failed ventures, including his departure from the promotion, the well was shallow for Gordon, and home, which should have been a sanctuary, was once again a stressful place.

Gordon felt that one of his accomplishments with FCW, however, was the tune-up and development of future stars like Dustin Rhodes, Dallas Page, Scott Hall, and Bam Bam Bigelow. The young guys

got exposure to veterans like Gordon, Dusty, Terry Funk, Steve Keirn, Mike Graham, Sir Oliver Humperdink, the Nasty Boys, and Lou Perez. However, as much satisfaction as Gordon received for seeing the careers of those young men advanced, it didn't pay his bills.

At least one of Gordon's benefits from his broadcasting career was still available. He had a huge number of frequent flyer miles. While speaking with Pancho Alvarez one day, Gordon said, "Hey, let's get the hell out of here for a few days and take Smoky and Betty on a trip." The two couples flew to Bermuda for a four-day break and had a great time. While dining during the trip, Betty surprised everyone at dinner when she blurted out, "Gordon, I'd like you to deliver my eulogy." Both couples had known each other for many years, beginning with their mutual involvement in stock car racing, and they all knew that Betty had suffered with lung cancer. When Betty passed away later that year, Gordon honored her request at the memorial service.

Chapter 12: The Doll House

Good friends together in California:
(l to r) Don Curtis, Gordon, Eileen (Smoky) Solie, and Dotty Curtis

Gordon gradually began to filter his way back into the big time when he began broadcasting a short segment on the NWA Power Hour, and worked his way into conducting interviews with wrestlers for the Clash of Champions pay-per-view events. He was always grateful to Ted Turner for putting him back on WTBS and on the payroll.

WWE Hall of Fame broadcaster, Jim Ross, was an executive then with WCW, and recalled meeting Gordon for the first time. "He was a small man with giant pipes and a dry, witty sense of humor. He was receptive to me, and willing to openly discuss our vocation in hopes of giving me advice I was seeking to make myself a better announcer, and to maintain the level of performance that Gordon had established."

Jim also relayed his thoughts about working with Gordon on specific events: "Gordon and I broadcast one of WCW's most talked about, live, prime-time Clash of Champions entitled New York Knockout, which emanated from Troy, New York. On this program, Gordon was the color analyst and I did the play-by-play. I would have been more than happy to have switched roles with 'The Dean,' but he felt at that stage of the game that he would better serve the product doing the color. I learned a great deal from him that night, including that oftentimes 'less is more.' Gordon was splendidly succinct in his descriptions of the

evening, especially in the still-talked-about main event, which was an ‘I Quit’ match featuring Ric Flair vs. Terry Funk with Gary Hart managing Funk. This match from November 15, 1989 is still one that the fans regularly ask me about. I am proud that I suggested that WCW put us together for this match, and to this day, it is one of my most memorable nights. I look back at it fondly.”

When asked about his favorite match involving the "Dean," columnist Mike Mooneyham referred to the same card that Jim Ross mentioned: "The Ric Flair-Terry Funk ‘I Quit Match’ at Clash of the Champions IX: New York Knockout in 1989 was one of the most memorable. Gordon brilliantly conveyed the drama and intensity of this match by uttering what became a very famous line: ‘Five letters. Two words. I quit.’ It was a rare moment in wrestling broadcast history.

"Whenever Gordon was plugging a show coming up in the Charleston area," said Mike, "he would always mention my name and my local newspaper

column. They'd cut into the matches and do localized spots for the different markets, and Gordon would talk about 'his old friend Mike Mooneyham.' I always considered it an honor because I thought so much of him. One of my favorite times was spending an evening behind the scenes with four guys I considered to be the greatest wrestling announcers of all time: Gordon, Jim Ross, Lance Russell and Bob Caudle. Just to be able to soak up some of that knowledge was such an experience. Gordon, Bob and Lance were guys I grew up listening to, and they were big reasons that I embraced wrestling like I did. Their unique announcing style was the soundtrack for televised professional wrestling during one of the greatest eras."

As Gordon filtered his way back into WTBS, there were those that felt he was entitled to some extra consideration. "Because Gordon liked to participate in 'happy hours' occasionally, we always scheduled his production in Atlanta to start at nine in the morning," stated Jim Ross. "This

would allow Gordon to fly in the evening before, enjoy his flight, and subsequently, his social time at the Omni Hotel located in the CNN Center. That's where the WCW production studio was located, and Gordon could simply take the elevator down to work the next morning. We always had a nice cup of coffee awaiting him."

Another man on staff at WCW with Gordon and Jim Ross was a production specialist named Keith Mitchell. He had joined WCW in 1989, before Gordon returned, and had previously produced Dallas wrestling for Texas promoter Fritz von Erich. Keith described the atmosphere at WCW and his work relationship with Gordon: "By the time I got to WCW, the studio wrestling era had basically come to an end. The Saturday Night program was being produced at Center Stage in Atlanta, which was not much bigger than a studio, but the focus of WCW was to try to imitate the WWF.

"At that time the WWF was younger, flashier,

and more cartoonish, none of which could ever describe Gordon. I don't think that Gordon was working with WCW at that time, but when it was decided that we would create a sober, news-style segment, his was the first and only name thought of to host it. It was entitled Wrestling Network News and mimicked the CNN background logo-style announcer on camera. Gordon was the 'go-to guy' anytime WCW wanted to do a more sober, believable segment or program. It goes without saying that Gordon was respected and admired by everyone associated with pro wrestling. To this day, Gordon impersonations and quotations are common in conversations among wrestling folks. 'Unnhhh-uhhh', 'crimson mask', 'pier 6 brawl,' and other 'Solie-isms' are as much a part of the lexicon of pro wrestling as 'ring' and 'mat.'

"WCW had a small studio downstairs at CNN center where we did voice-overs and on-cameras and, from time to time, Ted Turner came in to record something for us or the TBS and CNN promotion departments. Without fail, the first thing

Ted would say was ‘Where’s Gordon?’ If Ted was aware of anyone in his wrestling organization other than Ric Flair or Gordon Solie, he never gave any indication of it. He knew the important role that Gordon and wrestling had played in the success of his network, was not ashamed of it, nor ever forgot it, unlike the AOL-Time Warner ‘mis-management’ teams that came in after Ted was ousted from TBS.

"I can truly say that I never heard Gordon have a cross word with anyone, nor did he ever speak negatively about anyone. That is saying a lot considering the atmosphere at WCW most of the time. He was the consummate professional and gentleman, always on time and ready to work. His work ethic harkened back to a bygone era, when you respected your profession and your co-workers, and kayfabe was more than just a term. He never made a comedy of wrestling. He covered it like a serious sport and was one of the most believable, if not the most believable, announcer in the business.

"Gordon's style of announcing can still seen in the play-by-play work done by the greatest announcers today, Jim Ross and Mike Tenay, both of whom respected and admired Gordon."

Gordon's return to WTBS even had a positive effect on many who were not involved as performers or in the production of the show. A teenager at the time, Alex Marvez had faithfully watched Gordon on TV ever since he was a little boy. "I was a huge Gordon Solie mark," claimed Alex. "He was such a good announcer that I would watch CWF even when the matches and talent itself would dip from time to time. I was 'smartened up' about the wrestling business at the age of fifteen in February 1987 when attending a CWF show in Miami Beach. I began stringing at the Miami Herald later that year and was approached about writing a wrestling column in August 1989. With WCW running shows in Florida, I got to meet Gordon when he was an event coordinator through our mutual friend, Howard Brody. Gordon indulged my request for

story after story about the grappling game. It was the start of a friendship that would continue even after Gordon stopped working for WCW." Today, Alex is a senior editor for FoxSports.com.

"Off the job," said Alex, "Gordon was the first person I ever heard order a drink this way: 'Vodka on the rocks. No vegetables.' In regard to his job, I do want to say that I believe Gordon always was resentful that the 'office' wouldn't smarten him up on many of the angles beforehand, but that's Gordon's fault because he was too good. If he wasn't so masterful at improvising to what was transpiring with the wrestlers, the bookers would have needed to give him the storylines beforehand. As a viewer, you always felt that you were watching the mayhem unfold at the exact same time as Gordon. Little did fans know that was usually the case, which makes the job he did even more impressive."

When asked what else separated Gordon from other wrestling broadcasters, Alex replied,

"Colloquialisms mixed with a deadpan announcing style that gave pro wrestling a legitimate athletic feel. To describe a bloody face as a 'crimson mask' was pure genius. 'He'd fight a buzz saw and give it the first two rounds,' and, 'He'd take two punches to throw one,' were two of my other favorites. And the all-time best happened when Cocoa Samoa was working a match. I swear Gordon said, 'I've never seen a Samoan who couldn't carry his weight in gravel.' If Gordon says so, I believe it."

FCW continued to promote some small venues after Gordon went back to work for Turner, but eventually, the promotion just ceased to exist. Gordon was angry, but it wasn't just the fact that he lost money in another business. It was more than that. He wanted to announce first-rate professional wrestling in Florida just like he had in the past. That vision evaporated quickly.

In late 1989, Steve Keirn and Mike Graham formed a new company called Professional

Wrestling of Florida, Inc. In November, they were pictured on the front of the Tampa Tribune business section, and the announcement was made that Graham and Keirn were trying to take their new company public. David Szymanski's column in the Tampa Tribune revealed that the new company was waiting approval from the Securities and Exchange Commission to sell between $500,000 and $2,000,000 of public stock. Symanski pointed out that Global Wrestling did the same thing when it sold stock to begin house shows and TV programs in mid 1987, but was out of business by October 1988. It simply became too expensive to pay for wrestlers' contracts, arena fees, television time, and other costs of doing business.

In the meantime, Gordon appeared on Turner's World Championship Wrestling program with fellow broadcasters, Lance Russell and Chris Cruise. Turner's wrestling programs were competing well with the WWF through cablecasts, but it would take more than good ratings to catch

up to the WWF's 200 million dollar revenues per year.

The success of televised wrestling was once again providing Gordon with the cash flow he needed to get out of debt, but he also had to make a sacrifice. The lake house had to go. Six months of a steady paycheck simply wasn't enough to make things right, and with the "D" word [divorce] flying around the house during arguments, Gordon and Smoky reluctantly investigated the sale of their home.

Even during this difficult time in his life, Gordon managed to continue with his community charity work. Frances Keefe, founder of the Florida Child's Wish Come True, Inc., invited Gordon to become an honorary member of the board of directors. Gordon accepted the invitation on April 30, 1990. He attended meetings when he could and received regular updates from the board. He worked on setting up fundraisers through business, such as $1.00 per pair of shoes being given to

Florida's Shands Hospital. It was a win-win situation. The sponsoring companies got publicity and the children in need received funding. Gordon also was highly involved once again campaigning for Judge Ed Hinson, with bookings for dinners, writing ads, and plastering Tampa with "Vote for Hinson" signs.

Back in the mainstream of wrestling, Gordon recognized that WCW had a large followings of fans, but there were still many who preferred the old territorial style of pro wrestling, rather than the newer corporate-run industry. Many people blamed Vince McMahon for the changes and said he ruined wrestling territories as they knew them. They said they grew up going to the weekly wrestling matches at the Armory, other arenas, or high school gyms. It was a family affair. They took their children, grandmothers, and grandfathers. Attending pro wrestling matches was part of their lifestyle, and it seemed to have disappeared right in front of them. Others said the demise of territories wasn't McMahon's fault. It was simply

due to new communication, such as cable and satellite. Gordon, on the other hand, thought greed was a big factor in the downfall of the NWA promoters.

Gordon was comfortable in his different roles at WCW, but he was occasionally reminded of his past failings, such as the time when a notice came from the IRS to let him know that FCW's tax account had been turned over for enforcement. It was a cue for Gordon to approach new investments with caution.

Besides the excitement of seeing his own career back on track, Gordon also was happy to see one of his friends re-emerging into the sports world. At 63 years old, Pancho Alvarez decided to jump back into something he loved: stock car racing. Pancho still chuckles today when he talks about the fact that he was named the Midget Racing Association "Rookie of the Year" in 1990. He was having a ball, but he had one reservation. He wasn't sure if his late wife, Betty, would approve

of him racing again, and loved to tell one of his favorite stories: "When I bought my midget racer, we settled on the deal and shook hands. Right about that time, a big bolt of lightning came out of the sky." Someone asked, ‘What was that?’ I replied, ‘That was my wife.’”

Gordon was thrilled to know that Pancho was racing again, especially since he was still very interested in the sport, and attended the Daytona 500 with Jack Brisco whenever possible. Even though Gordon maintained his love for stock car racing, his real focus still centered on making contributions to the ‘“squared circle." In an attempt to help create an additional revenue stream for WCW, Gordon sent a proposal to the executive vice president of the company, Kip Allen Frey. Gordon wanted to use the 900-line phone concept to combine wrestling news with a daily or weekly poll question for the viewers. He provided sample questions that could be used for the fan polls. One was to ask if a wrestler should automatically be disqualified for hitting their opponent with a

closed fist, or for running them into the ring post. A second sample dealt with managers like Dallas Page and Paul E. Dangerously, who tried to dominate shows with their opinions and badger the announcers. The poll question would simply ask the fans, for example, if Page and Dangerously should be forbidden to cover matches (especially since they had financial interests in the outcomes), or if they should only be allowed to do limited interviews at the WCW board's discretion. The questions could be on any WCW issue, but Gordon thought the company should implement the polls as soon as possible to create more viewer interaction.

Dusty Rhodes returned to WCW in 1991 as a member of the booking committee. He later joined the broadcast team on the Wide World Wrestling show. Dusty and Gordon co-produced SuperBrawl on May 19, 1991 at the Bayfront Center in St. Petersburg. Things were once again moving along well for Gordon. He even got 100 orders for the Gordon Solie Wrestling Trivia game from the Ancillary Markets of Turner Home Entertainment.

Around this same time, Gordon produced another addition of cards for his game. A sample question and answer is listed below.

Question: "Name three members of the WCW team that won on all five days they appeared on the television game show, Family Feud."

Answer: "Sting, Flyin' Brian, Z-Man, Brad Armstrong and Jim Ross."

In June 1991, Gordon received his annual "Network of Benefit Plans" portfolio from Turner Broadcasting System, including a review of his salary, insurance options, and so forth. With a base salary of $78,000 plus benefits, 62-year-old Gordon Solie was costing Turner a little over $90,000 a year, not counting reimbursements for lodging and travel expenses.

In addition to his broadcasts and co-producing an event for WCW, Gordon was heralded, along with Jim Herd and Chip Burnham, by the Florida

Sheriffs Youth Ranch for the cash and non-cash donations from Superbrawl. Gordon also handled the responsibility of communicating with WCW executive vice president Jim Herd in regard to the "Regulated Industries Committee." The committee, via Gordon, provided Herd with seven pages of questions about WCW structure, financial agreements between the company and the wrestlers, wrestlers' training, health benefits, medical screening, injuries, safety of wrestlers and fans, beverage sales, target markets, and drug screening (steroids).

Gordon also enjoyed voicing his opinions on non-wrestling related topics. He drafted an editorial in regard to the complaints about the performance of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers' and their owner, Hugh Culverhouse. Gordon had heard enough griping and moaning. He pointed out to readers that Culverhouse had taken a risk when he bought an NFL franchise and located that franchise in Tampa, and there had been financial gains for the Tampa Bay Area, such as the Super Bowl

being held at Tampa Stadium in 1984 and 1991. Gordon also had become friends with some of the players, and especially missed quarterback Steve DeBerg, who he hoped would one day return to the team.

When 1991 came to an end, Gordon and Smoky had a new address. The lake house had been sold and they relocated to a villa in Palm Harbor, Florida. It wasn't a happy move for Gordon. He gave up 186 feet of lakefront property and 4,000 square feet under roof. He said, "It was either sell the homestead, and it was a homestead, or get a divorce. At the time, I decided to sell the homestead because it was cheaper than getting a divorce. There was a lot of pressure from friends, and even from my wife. Sometimes, your wife is not your friend. Sometimes, she's a real adversary. I find that particular aspect of marriage very interesting. There may have been a point in time where divorce was more suitable. However, Eileen appears to be happy with what we have here at the new home. I will never be happy with

it. It's ignominious … disappointing."

One of the villas near Gordon and Smoky's new residence housed a couple who never had children. "I think it's a mistake not to have any children," said Gordon. "They're a constant headache and they never grow up, but you never stop loving them or wanting the best for them." Gordon said he loved his children, but at that moment in time, he spoke negatively about them. He was still experiencing anguish from the failed wrestling promotions, and the subsequent financial and marital stress. That spilled over into his words as he described his brood. Pam, for example, rarely had a cross word with Gordon. At the time, however, there was some friction in their relationship. In Gordon's mind, he had even managed to alienate her. He spoke about Pam first as he continued, "I have one who is estranged … who doesn't talk to me at all. Another one who … I don't know … I guess when it seems to suit him that he's going to get something out of it … is respondent. And I've got one guy who is so proud

of his own existence that … he does his own thing. It's so funny. He is the guy like me who didn't need the complete college education. He needed to know, basically, that he could go and meet the grade. I have the other son who is so insecure that he had to take all the challenges, every single challenge available, and now once he's achieved those challenges, he's totally insecure. And then there's the oldest daughter, who … bless her heart … is so mature and so sharp in every direction, except her own personal life … and that's where she gets messed up and gets constantly hurt in the process."

It was apparent that the move to the villa did not help Gordon's frame of mind. He did not want to live in a 1,500-square-foot villa. In fact, he facetiously said, "It's a nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live here. We've been a little cramped since moving to the 'Doll House.' I thought I'd go out with a little more material growth."

During that time, Gordon developed friendships with several people at Turner Broadcasting, Inc. One friend was Mary Speider, who sent him two tickets for an upcoming NBA game in Miami between Miami Heat and the visiting Atlanta Hawks. He also received a letter from Ted Turner in which he thanked TBS employees for a great year and for helping him achieve a special award: Ted Turner was the Time Magazine "Man of the Year" for 1991.

In March 1992, Gordon flew to Studio City, California for the 25th anniversary banquet of the Cauliflower Alley Club (CAC), an organization formed to allow boxers and wrestlers to get together each year on a social basis. The visit had a dual purpose for Gordon. He was a board member for the organization, and, in addition, he wanted to conduct interviews for the "900" line. One segment, which featured Lou Thesz and Don Curtis, focused on the unusual first meeting between the two former wrestlers. Lou had been at dinner in New York with his mentor, Ed

"Strangler" Lewis, and Buffalo promoter, Ed Don George, when he learned that the University of Buffalo simply could not get a professional wrestler to work out with their star amateur wrestler. Of course, Lou volunteered to stop by the next day and work out with the young man. Lou said that was his first mistake. Upon entering the auditorium, he noticed that it was packed with thousands of students. The college coach came up and told him that the team's best wrestler wasn't available, but there was another guy ready to work out with him. Lou spoke in German to Ed Don George and told him there was something fishy going on. He didn't buy it for a second.

The match proceeded and Lou had things well in hand. He spent time working on Curtis' neck, trying to wear him down, like the pros so often do before moving in for the kill. Thesz thought the match was going smoothly when, all of a sudden, Don pulled a one-legged take down. Lou noticed that a local newsman was trying to take a photo while Curtis was on top with the advantage.

Luckily, every time the reporter tried to snap a picture, Ed "Strangler" Lewis and Ed Don George moved side to side and blocked the reporter's view. Since things were not going his way, Thesz applied a wristlock on Curtis and took control of the match. Since the hold was applied above the elbow, it was legal in the pro ranks, but illegal in the amateurs. Lou used the hold to win the match, while Don's coach screamed about him using an "illegal hold." Of course, when Lou took over the match, the two "Eds" moved aside so the newsman could take photos.

Don Curtis told Gordon that he saw things differently. According to Don, he got onto the mat with a well-conditioned professional, and the next thing he knew, he was in trouble because of the pressure Thesz applied to his neck. He said he simply fell down and saw Lou's leg, so he grabbed it and got the takedown. Don was grateful that Thesz let him look good for the fans at the college, and respected the fact that Lou let him know who the boss was when it really counted. It took a

while after the match for Don to get the kinks out of his neck to the point where he could simply raise his head.

Gordon asked both men about the state of pro wrestling in 1992, as compared to the old days. Lou said the new age of wrestling was "choreographed tumbling." Don said when the old-time wrestlers retired from the ring, they took over running the business. Four decades later, their sons, or someone else, were running wrestling promotions, and most of them never wrestled. Thesz added, “Wrestling no longer belongs to the wrestlers. It belongs to the television people and to some of the promoters.”

Before March 1992 came to an end, the corporate way of doing business was beginning to get under Gordon’s skin. Gordon had to file special requests for this, special requests for that. He had to file reports for expenses, and those expenses had to go through “approvers." Gordon’s expense "approvers" were Jim Ross or Tony

Schiavone. He thought about the old days when he handed Cowboy or Eddie a bill and they paid him. And that was just one of the changes in the new corporate era of pro wrestling. Another change was that instead of 60-minute-long matches with two-out-of-three pinfalls, the new age matches were much shorter, faster-paced, and the emphasis shifted from wrestling to the wrestlers' personas. The other significant change was that the real competition was down to two promotions: WCW and the WWF. For years, Verne Gagne's AWA had consistently been one of America's top wrestling promotions, but even that was inactive.

Another concern for Gordon at the time was Kathleen Ovack, a reporter for the Tampa Edition of the St. Petersburg Times, who wanted to know about Gordon's involvement with Orlando Garcia, John Fernandez, and Michael Napoli, in regard to certain property bought and sold in Tampa. While targeting Judge Ed Hinson in a feature story, Ovack discovered that Gordon, Hinton and Napoli were linked because they bought some land together.

Ovack and Chuck Murphy released the article, "Judge had ties to the mob," back on January 28, 1992. Hinson claimed that his ties to members of organized crime were innocent and he simply invested in some property. The article pointed out that Hinson had given his power of attorney to Michael Napoli, whom the Times described as a "cocaine trafficker for the Mafia." In response, Hinson said he did that on one occasion in order to close a real estate transaction. At the time, he was busy with judicial duties and Gordon was unavailable (Ovack and Murphy 1A).

Eyebrows were also raised when Hinson, as an attorney, had three cases against Napoli expunged, and Florida citizens were only allowed to do that one time. It didn't help his image when the Times reported that Hinson bought liquor from Vincent LoScalzo for the judges' conference. That wouldn't have been a problem, except for the fact that LoScalzo had been seen at the home of Santo Trafficante, Jr. with Dominick Napolitano present. Evidently, the FBI tied Napolitano to the Bonanno

family in New York (Ovack and Murphy 1A). It didn't look good, either, that Hinson's wife and her partner sold real estate in Tampa to a company owned by Santo Trafficante, Jr.

Gordon just wanted the story to go away, because as far as he was concerned, he hadn't done anything wrong, and he always prided himself on his professional reputation. He was angry that a reporter was trying to connect him to the mob. He did, however, keep an old fan letter signed with the same last name as one of the families mentioned in the articles:

> I am writing you this letter maybe, because I have nothing else better to do. First of all, there's Joe LeDuc. Now, here's a phony son-of-a-bitch. And just because he don't believe in the Eddie Graham extreme sense of fair play, you Gordon Solie, hate him too. Well, you're being a hypocrite. Because, when Big Joe was clean he might have won most of his matches, but he used to take a terrific beating,

too. Now that he's dirty, he only takes a beating from the American nigger lover, Dusty Rhodes. You see, deep inside, Joe is still a friend of that motherfu–er, Dusty. And of all the wrestlers in this area I have the most contempt for Dusty. As for this Sweet Brown Sugar, tell Skip Young to take off that damn mask. You see, most of these stupid Florida fans don't know who Sweet Brown Sugar is, but I do.
Thank you,
Santo Trafficante

When things quieted down, Gordon recruited a company to find markets for his trivia game. Consumer Products Corporation researched various game manufacturers, but all the responses came back as rejections. Either the game companies couldn't see adding a wrestling product or they weren't keen on the idea of adding a trivia board game to their product line.

Gordon's duties for WCW expanded a bit with

tasks like providing a report to Jim Ross of suggestions for the use of the "900" phone line. He provided examples of how to encourage fans to call in for updates, polls, etc. Whether the storyline was about Cactus Jack, Big Van Vader, "Dr. Death" Steve Williams, Scotty Flamingo, or Sting, Gordon wanted the fans to interact via the phone lines. It also was a good way to plug future house show and pay-per-view events.

Lance Russell got involved with the "900" number before Gordon did and explained how the project evolved: "I was hired the year before Gordon retuned to WTBS. Although I was working for the company, I didn't have a full schedule, and I don't think some of the folks like Jim Herd quite knew what to do with me. The '900' line was almost a secret at first because it was actually owned under a different name and acquired when Ted Turner bought out Crockett. When they finally realized that WCW had this untapped resource, Jim Herd asked me if I would get involved in promoting the idea. Well, we decided to put a

wrestler live on the 900 line and I went to Corpus Christi. Sting was the wrestler on the 900 line the first time and the phone rang off the hook. I think we generated around $350,000 just from that. Later on, I had other performers like Missy Hyatt included on the 900 line."

"When further conversation came up about the 900 line and its income potential, I asked about working with Gordon. WCW agreed and Gordon was on board. He was very interested in the project, but pointed out that we had a couple of hurdles to climb, such as recovering from a recession and the fact that 900 numbers had a bad name because they were more commonly associated with sex hotlines. After putting our heads together, it was decided that Gordon and I would go to the PPV events and broadcast the cards live on the 900 line. We were both totally enthused, especially since we were both "old school" wrestling guys with strong radio backgrounds. It sounded like our 'cup of tea.' Society was changing, but Gordon and I were

philosophically in sync. Before we knew it, we were flying to all the pay-per-views and doing the play-by-play for anyone who wanted to call in and hear our commentary.

"Gordon and I arrived in Arizona a few days before one PPV and had a mini vacation. Smoky came along with Gordon, and my wife, Audrey, accompanied me on the trip. The four of us hung around for a couple of days, had a great time, and then headed to Phoenix to broadcast the show. As the concept grew, the 900 line was available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and we needed more entertainers. We both knew Steve Beverly, who had published one of the early wrestling newsletters, so we enlisted his help. In fact, Steve and I are from the same town of Jackson, Tennessee. We also got Dave Meltzer to get involved because he was kind of the new 'guru' of wrestling newsletters. One day, Steve would call in information for the phone line, and the next day it was Dave, and another day it was Jim Ross, and so forth. The phone line turned into a profitable

venture for WCW."

According to Lance, the only problem with the 900 line broadcasts at the PPV events occurred when WCW began to add fireworks to the shows. "Something in the smoke from the fireworks didn't agree with me. We were broadcasting live, and I was fine until fireworks went off. Then I'd start coughing like crazy. I had to stop speaking and Gordon had to run with it by himself. That was one thing we both liked about working together. We always backed each other up."

In early September, WCW celebrated twenty years of wrestling programming airing on WTBS. Along with a pay-per-view called Clash of the Champions, there was a black tie affair at Center Stage in Atlanta. Scooter Leslie managed to get a couple of tickets, and before he knew it, he was reunited with Gordon. Since Gordon's mentoring days back in 1976, Scooter had taken ringside photographs for Pro Wrestling Illustrated, and later began ring announcing at various venues in South

Carolina for Crockett's house shows. As the two of them were talking, one of the wrestlers came up an asked to speak with Scooter for a moment. Scooter excused himself and told Gordon he'd be back in a few minutes.

"One of the guys had a question about a photograph, so I left for a moment to speak with him," said Scooter. "Andre was sitting there at the bar, Dusty was standing there, and then I saw Jody Hamilton who, of course, was wearing his (Assassin) mask. There were so many tuxedos there that it looked like a penguin convention. I finished quickly and came back to rejoin Gordon. By then, he was speaking to another man who had his back to me. As I came around Gordon and looked at the man, I just froze. My fiancé asked, 'Are you okay? You look like you saw a ghost.' I barely got out the words, 'Do you know who that is?'

"My fiance answered, 'No'

"'That man hit 755 home runs!' I replied. It was, indeed, Hank Aaron, the legendary home run king of Major League Baseball. That was the only time in my life that I wished I could pull a baseball out of my ass. I could picture the ball with the number '755' written on it with Hank Aaron's autograph below. I shook his hand as I said, 'Hi, Mr. Aaron,' and probably still had a dumbfounded look on my face. As I looked at Hank and Gordon standing there, I noticed that they were about the same height, but it was apparent that Hank had much bigger biceps. To this day, I still have a clear picture in my mind of the time I stood there chatting with Gordon Solie and Hank Aaron."

Before 1992 came to an end, a major shake-up occurred in the executive ranks at WCW when Gordon's friend and associate, Jim Ross, left WCW. Jim, or "JR" as most people refer to him, was fed up with the WCW politics and the changes in the company structure, so he took a position with Vince McMahon at WWF. Gordon felt that WCW had lost the best up-and-coming broadcaster in

professional wrestling.

Although there had been many changes in Gordon's own career since "Black Saturday" in 1984, a few things remained the same. One, for example, was that Gordon still had a keen interest in writing, and a new column called "Sports Slants by Solie" began appearing in a periodical called Sports South. In one of his columns, Gordon made his projections about the future of the National Football League. With free agency and its salary boosts, combined with declining television and attendance revenues, Gordon thought two things needed to happen. First, the NFL should lower its ticket prices to fill the stadiums, and second, the NFL needed to change from limited pay-per-views to a heavy-duty PPV schedule within five years (14).

In another issue, Gordon wrote about former Major League Baseball player, Pete Rose. He first met Rose on a flight from Atlanta to Tampa. By the time the plane landed, Gordon was sold on Pete

Rose. It wasn't imaginable at the time that Rose would later be banned from MLB because of gambling. When Rose made the news a second time for betting on the horses, Gordon discussed the Rose saga with the patrons of Waukegan Pizza in Oldsmar, Florida, a place Gordon called "Oldsmar's answer to Boston's bar 'Cheers.'"

It was the perfect place for Gordon to take a poll about Rose, who had paid his dues by being banned from baseball and serving jail time for tax evasion. The crowd at Waukegan Pizza was unanimous in their response, and Gordon wrote, "Lift the ban, and you sportswriters, vote Rose into the Hall of Fame. COME ON FOR PETE'S SAKE" (13).

When Paul Allen began to publish souvenir programs for racetracks, Gordon wrote a regular column titled "The Checkered Flag." Race fans, however, didn't know Gordon was the author because he was writing under the pseudonym "Axle Geare." In describing the action on the ovals

in his February 27, 1993 article, Gordon wrote that stock car racing "was the least corrupt sport in the world" (Geare). While sharing contemporary news about drivers Jeff Gordon, Davey Allison, or Rick Wilson joining Richard Petty's team, Gordon also reflected on his own career in racing. He thought again about his friend Bill Morris, and remembered when Morris attended the Daytona "500" and came to Golden Gate Speedway. The visit to the Florida tracks prompted Morris to make some changes when he returned to England. He added figure-8 racing, and had the numbers on his son's stock car changed to "00" as a tribute to the Reutimann racing family. Buzzie Reutimann said Bill Morris called to be sure it was okay with his family to use the number "00." Thinking of Morris, and the fact that Morris was almost 80 years old, made Gordon realize that he was no longer a young man, either. Although he hadn't been completely put out to pasture, Gordon was no longer one of the more visible faces in professional wrestling. In La Gaceta, Tedd Webb described Gordon's declining role at the

microphone:

> Gordon is not bitter. In fact, he still toots the horn of the Turner folks, but that is Gordon, never known to say anything bad about anyone. In fact, that is what separates him from the rest. Gordon Solie is not a legend, he is a shrine. He is professional wrestling. Gordon is an icon. Believe me, I have been on the road and bumped into him at the Atlanta Airport, and people won't leave him alone. Autograph hounds are all over him. How many young kids got punished in school for imitating him? Mark Beiro, the voice of Tampa Jai Alai, is perhaps the best Solie imitator. I saw him ejected from class for speaking ala Solie. I myself got bumped out of a few classes for doing Gordon play-by-play. His impact has been felt by all. His trademark play-by-play has been imitated, but never duplicated by others in the business. He is truly a piece of Americana. (23).

Even though Gordon wasn't at the mike as often, he enjoyed some of his activities with WCW. By the end of March 1993, he was busy compiling a list of contacts for an upcoming legends show.

Gordon and Gary Juster worked together to whittle down the list to 26 "legends of wrestling" for Slamboree 1993: A Legend's Reunion. Four men — Lou Thesz, Verne Gagne, Mr. Wrestling II, and Eddie Graham (posthumously) — were selected to be the inaugural class of wrestlers inducted into the WCW Hall of Fame. Other legends introduced at the May 23, 1993 event included Ole Anderson, Assassin #2 [Jody Hamilton], Ox Baker, Red Bastien, Lord James Blears, Nick Bockwinkel, The Crusher, Dory Funk, Jr., Greg Gagne, Bob Geigel, Stu Hart, Gene Kiniski, Wahoo McDaniel, Bugsy McGraw, The Fabulous Moolah, Don Owen, Dusty Rhodes, Grizzly Smith, Magnum T.A., John Tolos, Maurice "Mad Dog" Vachon, and Johnny Valentine.

Gordon didn't whine about his limited

broadcasting role with WCW, but he was well aware that he was no longer the dominant voice in professional wrestling. He received correspondence from his acquaintance, Gil Cabot, and learned that Gil had similar worries. It wasn't just Gordon's diminishing role that concerned Cabot, but WCW's programming, as well. When Cabot was in Atlanta doing production work for the movie On Thin Ice starring Patrick Swayze, he was injured. While resting and recuperating, Cabot had an opportunity to watch the WCW television show. He contacted Bill Shaw, the executive vice president of WCW, and made suggestions, including one about having a female at the microphone. He suggested that Shaw use someone like actress Kim Devane.

On May 3, 1993, Full Effect Entertainment, Inc. sent Gordon a screenplay outline for a movie called Money for Nothin. They wanted Gordon's opinion and/or assistance. The outline, written by Thomas K. Bailey and J. Frank James, involved a plot about a down-and-out man who had twelve

hours to claim a $1,000,000 lottery ticket, but was simultaneously being pursued by the police. A movie with a very similar title, Money for Nothing, was released in 1993, but involved a man recovering a million dollars that fell out of an armored car.

During the summer months that followed, Gordon received a couple of bits of good news. First, his friend, Steve DeBerg, was returning to Tampa, and was expected to start for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers at quarterback. In that same week, Lou Thesz, Dan Gable, and Mike Chapman, were starting a "Wrestling Hall of Fame" in Iowa, with the emphasis on wrestlers who had a strong amateur wrestling background. It was part of an effort from Thesz to bring a "degree of wrestling, as well as financial success, back to the ‘carnival’ pro wrestling had become." Thesz contacted Ted Turner’s company to share the news, and at the same time, offered to share his expertise in areas of wrestling promotion. The reply Thesz received from WCW was a "refrigerator letter." Thesz’

letter had been forwarded to Bill Shaw, and in turn, Shaw politely informed Thesz that WTBS wasn't interested at the time in being involved in the development of the new Wrestling Hall of Fame.

A frustrated Thesz replied to Shaw, reiterating that he was simply offering his services and ideas, and wasn't asking for anything. He made it clear that the Wrestling Hall of Fame was well-funded and completely developed. They were simply letting the Turner organization know that they could be used as an access to wrestling talent in support of his plan.

During the second half of 1993, Gordon and Smoky began looking for a different house, and began making plans to move away from the villa in Palm Harbor. Gordon was tired of the close proximity of neighbors, and their constant complaining about his personal habits, including his feeding of the local raccoon population. He had sympathy for the homeowners' association, but felt

obligated to feed the animals. He and Smoky brought three pets when they moved in, even though association covenants stated that two pets were the maximum allowed. Gordon continued his love of animals and fed up to ten raccoons almost daily. He said the raccoons loved cat food. Even so, there remained a certain distance between Gordon and the wild animals. He never completely trusted them, and they never completely trusted him. "That's the way nature intended it," claimed Gordon. "If you ever trust a wild animal completely, then you risk injury and possible death."

The new home purchased by Gordon and Smoky on Stroud Court in Port Richey was a three-bedroom, single-family residence. It was an improvement over the house in Palm Harbor, but it still didn't measure up to Gordon's love of the lake house. The new residence would be the last home for both Gordon and Smoky.

One early piece of mail to arrive at their new

home was a postcard from a friend, who jokingly told Gordon, "Have fun with this the next time you're in Atlanta." Attached to the postcard was a cut-out advertisement from a newspaper with a "511" phone number for "Joe & Boni" who knew the "scoops" about pro wrestling. Joe and Boni were Joe Pedicino and his wife, Boni Blackstone. Calls to the "511" number were billed at a cost of 50-cents a minute for up to five minutes.

Life at home was on an upswing, but some of the changes at work had Gordon concerned. The 900 line crashed and burned, not because WCW wasn't getting a lot of calls, but because they weren't getting paid for those calls. There was a lot of internal emotion in the company as employees tried to collect on the accounts receivables. "I saw a lot of $1000 phone bills when I tried to negotiate with various phone companies," said Lance Russell. "It was incredible. There were stacks and stacks of large phone bills that people just didn't pay. I explained to phone companies that people made the calls and owed the money, but along with

politicians, they didn't want to sue people for phone bills to a wrestling hot line. I understood if some parent got a $600 phone bill and didn't know that their child had made the calls. They were obviously in shock. But there were a high percentage of adult callers who simply refused to pay."

"I left WCW in 1993," stated Lance, "but I still have some great memories, especially the times I worked with Gordon. He had a great sense of humor. I used to tease him because people called him the 'Dean of wrestling announcers.' I told him that I was on television when he was still messing around with stock cars. Some of the guys picked up on my razzing and starting to call me the 'Grand-dean of wrestling announcers' when Gordon was nearby. He was a good sport when we were joking around. What I really admired about Gordon Solie was his integrity in the business. That wasn't always easy, either, in the pro wrestling business. On top of that, we always heard about how much the other Turner Broadcasting divisions hated

WCW. They couldn't stand to see professional wrestlers walking around all the time in the CNN Plaza. Ted Turner never acted like that. That's where Gordon was such a different stand-out. His broadcasting oozed with integrity."

Regardless of any pitfalls or the outcome of the 900 phone line, it was a special time in pro wrestling history when two legendary announcers, Gordon Solie and Lance Russell, broadcast together for WCW. Gordon spoke often about the talent demonstrated by Lance and how much he enjoyed working with him.

On January 10, 1994, Gordon wrote a letter to Bill Shaw, Bob Dhue, and Eric Bischoff, and shared his thoughts on a different subject, an overview of a possible animation/cartoon series featuring WCW wrestlers. After pointing out a couple of potential legal issues, Gordon suggested titles for animation, such as "WCW Combat," "WCW Shockmaster and Friends," and "WCW Dudes." Gordon wrote one potential storyline

about wrestlers befriending a "handicapped youth in a wheelchair who was in constant danger because he witnessed a crime." Another scenario involved a "power struggle between the Assassin and his nefarious crew to recruit a top collegiate wrestler, and Shockmaster and his crew who have a different lifestyle." It was the old wrestling theme of good versus evil.

Gordon suggested three formats for consideration: "live host to cartoon," "mix of live wild footage and cartoon," or "straight animation." He also said the WCW animation would offer numerous marketing possibilities, such as the sale of doll figures, secret rings, games, etc. Gordon made it clear that he was simply sharing ideas, and although some may be academic, he hoped his input might help kick off a successful WCW animation series.

At the end of February 1994, Gordon was co-hosting WCW Pro Wrestling with Larry Zbyszko and Dusty Rhodes, which aired on WTBS and

through syndication. The other syndicated show, WCW Main Event, along with programs like WCW Saturday Night, and WCW World Wide, were hosted by Tony Schiavone, Bobby Heenan, Gene Okerlund, Jesse Ventura and Eric Bischoff.

Larry Zbyszko got involved when WCW asked him to try announcing after a knee injury sidelined him from the ring for a period of time. He spoke about his early broadcasting days: "When I started announcing, my first teacher was Gordon Solie. Right off the bat, I was learning from a legend. We used to go to lunch together at Reggie's British Pub at CNN Plaza. I ate fish and chips, while Gordon consumed a few drinks and a pack of cigarettes. One day, I picked Gordon up at the airport, and after he got in the car, he asked, 'Where are the joints?' I told him I didn't have any. Gordon was a character.

"While we were working at WCW, Gordon and I saw the business change. At one time, Ted Turner and Jane Fonda would walk by. Ted knew Gordon,

so he always made a point of coming over, shaking Gordon's hand and chatting for a while. That changed later into a bunch of new people walking around, many of whom were idiots in relationship to the business. If Gordon or I made a suggestion, the new guys would say, 'Maybe that's how you used to do it, but we don't do it like that anymore.' I saw the frustration on Gordon's face and it was a shame. What Gordon Solie did for wrestling is a lost art. He really made us believe in the fantasy of the stories about the good guys as heroes against the bad guys. Other than someone like Jim Ross, that's primarily been replaced today by guys who just scream into the microphone."

In March, a CNN crew met Gordon at the Cauliflower Alley Club reunion to tape interviews with the legends. WCW planned to use the interviews for "bumpers, promos and segments." The events at the CAC reunion went hand-in-hand with Gordon's involvement in the upcoming Wrestling Slamboree '94: A Legends Reunion. Knowing that Slamboree '94 was coming to

Philadelphia, Bill Gilman decided to use Gordon as the focus of a two-part article. After mentioning Slamboree '94, Gilman asked Gordon to comment on the current style of professional wrestling: "There is certainly more of a concentration on the personality and charisma of the wrestlers, and not as much on overall skills. Much of that is dictated by the public. Fans want to see more of the high speed, percussion stuff" (B4). For the second year in a row, Gordon announced the inductees for the WCW Hall of Fame.

The next bit of industry news to reach Gordon's ears saddened him a great deal. Larry Simon, aka The Great Malenko, passed away from cancer on August 27, 1994. Gordon had nothing but fond memories of Larry's enormous contributions to CWF. After Larry left CWF and went out on his own, however, he and Gordon became rivals. The stellar relationship that once existed between Gordon and Larry deteriorated as they each worked in competing promotions. None of that seemed to matter much after Larry became gravely

ill. Gordon swallowed his pride and went to visit his old comrade in the hospital. "Malenko is one of the last of a breed of wrestlers that, in my opinion, just doesn't exist anymore," Gordon once said.

In the meantime, Gordon continued to work closely with board members to enhance the image of the Cauliflower Alley Club. The plan was to get more exposure, increase revenues, provide a scholarship/charity fund, and begin a concentrated membership drive. It also was decided that Gordon would emcee the first-ever East Coast Reunion, which would be held in Springfield, Massachusetts, on October 1, 1994. At the banquet itself, Gordon introduced the wrestling honorees, while Peter Heller and Bert Randolph Sugar handled the boxing honorees. Two of the boxers, Willie Pep and Carmen Basilio, autographed the cover of Gordon's reunion program.

By the time 1995 rolled in, Gordon was less than enthusiastic about his role in WCW. He didn't feel like he was making significant contributions to the

company as he had done in previous announcing/promoting roles. Basically, he was no longer allowed to use his creative genius, and that was boring for Gordon. He also had to put up with disrespect from some of the young announcers who, at times, acted like they wanted his job. Although he was sober for announcing duties with WCW, he did overindulge off the clock at times. When they were around WCW executives, the young guys would drop comments about Gordon's drinking, in hopes of making him look bad and making themselves look more worthy to replace him. The whole thing infuriated Gordon because, on the job, he had been a Boy Scout, and the wannabes complained about incidents that were not work-related.

One of the exceptions was a WCW announcer by the name of Mike Tenay, who joined the staff in 1994. Gordon spoke highly of Mike and thought he had a lot of potential for wrestling broadcasting. Evidently, Gordon was correct because Mike Tenay now has become the voice of TNA,

otherwise known as Total Nonstop Action, a popular program on Spike TV. According to Tenay, it was mutual admiration: "My first meeting with Gordon was in Florida at a live WCW PPV event. I had interviewed him previously (via telephone) on my Wrestling Insiders national radio show, and by then, I was broadcasting my show live on a remote feed from the Orlando Arena. I was eating a catered lunch one day at a table that included Jesse Ventura and Gordon. He was a real gentleman who offered to guest on the show that day. I can honestly say that Gordon and I hit it off immediately. To have someone of his stature show interest in my career meant everything to me. I'll never forget how giving he was of his time and how willing he was to take me under his wing and provide advice."

"I don't recall working together with Gordon on any televised shows or events," claimed Mike. "I definitely worked with him on WCW PPVs that were broadcast on radio. I was brought in to be a TV color-man on the international PPV matches,

and when those were over, I would often join Gordon to provide color to his radio play-by-play. I volunteered gratis to work with him (shows were produced by a company from St. Louis) and I always felt that I was ‘paid’ in my experience of working with this legendary broadcaster. And yes, I wish I had audio tapes of those unforgettable moments.

"I can only judge by how Gordon treated me. Specifically, I was blown away that he was so helpful to a younger announcer. I felt that some of the other on-air talent perceived me as a threat. Gordon was the exact opposite. In a story that I’ve told many times: After a WCW PPV event in Detroit, Gordon approached me and offered to both review my work and offer criticism. I was stunned that this Hall of Fame broadcaster was going out of his way to assist my career. He did mention that night that our future meetings would be held at the hotel bar after the live event.

"I can remember sitting next to Gordon on a

Delta flight after a WCW live event. At some point, I asked him for some advice. He said, ‘The best advice I can give you is to order two drinks, babe ... because they’re small.’ I also remember his fondness for Outback Steakhouse restaurants. Whatever city we were in, Gordon was on a mission to find an Outback for a nice dinner on the night before a show.

"The wrestlers, to my knowledge, treated him with the utmost respect. Much of the talent grew up watching him as a fan. I remember Dusty Rhodes being so complimentary of him, even years after Gordon retired. Let’s face it. Every list of great wrestling announcers starts with ‘The Dean’.

"My greatest memories of Gordon’s announcing involve big NWA world title matches. His calls of classics like Ric Flair vs. Harley Race show just how great he was as a broadcaster. I loved the vibe that he projected as an announcer. Gordon Solie’s pro sports style added emphasis to the importance of the match. Gordon calling a world

championship match was like Al Michaels or Bob Costas calling a Super Bowl or World Series ... just a perfect fit!"

Despite the ray of hope with additional talent like Mike, Gordon began to dwell on the drudgery of his work at WCW. The company was gearing up to produce a series of pay-per-views, with plans for Superbrawl V, WCW Uncensored, Slamboree '95, The Great American Bash, Bash at the Beach, Fall Brawl, Halloween Havoc, Starrcade, and one other that still lacked a catchy name. The projected cost for viewers was between $24.95 and $27.95 per PPV.

Although Gordon was scheduled to host SRN Radio broadcasts of future PPV events with Terry Taylor, he simply wasn't happy with the way things were going in the company. In February 1995, Gordon sat down and drafted a letter of termination to Ted Turner.

Dear Ted,

This is the _____ draft of a letter that I have weighed many times on my mind.
I can never thank you enough for the renewed hope you and Jim Herd allowed me when I had suffered a severe setback financially.
I have reached a point, however, that I cannot, in good faith, continue to promulgate the current theories of World Championship Wrestling.
I am of retirement age and now prefer to leave the industry before it becomes a totally live cartoon.
Since I am not, nor have I been, any sort of a voice in regard to the direction of the sport, but merely a pawn, I feel it is incumbent on me to leave.
Believe me when I say that I remain a loyal and worthy friend to you and your enterprises and I wish you continued success.
Thank you again for the opportunities and kindness you have afforded me.
My retirement and resignation will be effective March _____ 1995.

With fondest regards-I remain,
G.S.

Gordon didn't mail the draft, but kept it in his personal files for possible use in the future. He mulled over a statement he made in 1985 — that he would be replaced by a younger man within five years. It had been ten years, but he was watching it happen.

When Gordon saw the announcers listed for WCW Main Event — Eric Bischoff, Dusty Rhodes and Gene Okerlund — but not his own name — he knew it wouldn't take much for him to bid farewell to WCW. Gordon stayed on a bit longer because it was again time to prepare for Slamboree, and that was something he had really enjoyed the two previous years.

At one point during the week prior to Slamboree '95, however, it didn't look like Gordon was even going be there. A few days before the show, Gordon got a call from David Crockett, who

wanted to know if Gordon needed biographical information for the 1995 WCW Hall of Fame inductees. Gordon felt insulted. Not only was he not consulted about the inductees, as in the past, but he didn't even agree with the selections. In a later interview with Wrestling Perspective's David Skolnick, Gordon reiterated that he wouldn't commit to Crockett at the time about making an appearance at Slamboree '95. That was where the conversation with Crockett ended.

A short time later, Gordon received another phone call. This time, it was from Eric Bischoff, a vice president of WCW. "I'll never forget the day Gordon told me about that phone call," said Bob Allyn. "Gordon was hot! He said he argued with Eric Bischoff about an appearance at Slamboree '95, and Bischoff fired him while they were talking on the phone. He said Eric Bischoff was an 'arrogant son-of-a-bitch.' If anyone wanted to get Gordon riled up at the time, all they had to do was mention Bischoff's name.

"Gordon said repeatedly over the years that his ego got the better of him during his next phone conversation. Gary Juster called and tried to resolve the situation, and after getting nowhere with Gordon, he spilled the beans. Gordon was being inducted into the WCW Hall of Fame at the upcoming ceremony. After a short deliberation, Gordon agreed to attend. He was willing to handle his broadcasting obligations for Slamboree '95, but more than anything, he wanted to accept his induction into the WCW Hall of Fame. In the space of fifteen minutes, he went from being fired to hired."

Gordon only had a few days to gather the biographical information for the Hall of Fame inductees. He still didn't agree with all of the names on the list. He knew that Angelo Poffo, for example, had contributed much as a wrestler and a promoter, but Gordon didn't think he had done enough in WCW to be one of the selections. One of the classic stories found in Gordon's notes, however, was about the time when Angelo did

6,033 sit-ups in just over four hours, a feat which secured Poffo a place in Ripley's Believe It Or Not. Gordon wrote in his notes that Terry Funk and John Studd, two other inductees, both had movie credits in addition to their wrestling credits. Studd appeared in Harley Davidson and the Marlboro Man, The Marrying Man, and The Protector, while Funk had roles in Road House, Paradise Alley, and served as a stunt coordinator for Rocky V.

Besides Studd, Poffo and Funk, Gordon introduced Antonio Inoki, Wahoo McDaniel and Dusty Rhodes at the ceremony. Dusty, in turn, introduced Gordon as a new member of the WCW Hall of Fame. For once, Gordon was speechless. He was literally choked up, but managed to get out the words, "I thank you all very much." No doubt, the thought of his impending, self-imposed retirement played on his emotions as much as the fact that he was being honored.

Along with his broadcast duties for the 1995 WCW Hall of Fame ceremony, Gordon fulfilled

his obligations for the event, including the SRN Radio broadcast. After the opening music played, Gordon, Terry Taylor, and John Ellis ran a breakdown of the Slamboree matches. After the event, Gordon finished his part of the credits and closed the program with, "For Gerry Dials, John Ellis, and Terry Taylor, this is Gordon Solie saying, 'We'll see you for the Great American Bash in Dayton, Ohio, and goodnight everybody'" ("Slamboree '95").

Shortly after the Slamboree, Gordon tendered his notice of resignation, and subsequently stayed on long enough to complete his scheduled broadcasts during the notice period. Mike Mooneyham had his own thoughts about Gordon's last television broadcast with WCW: "My favorite Gordon line probably went unnoticed by most fans, who at the time had been turned off by a fairly unimpressive WCW product. The man who put wrestling on the map on TBS had been unceremoniously dropped by the organization after 'philosophical differences' with then-WCW executive vice

president Eric Bischoff. It was Gordon's last show with the company, a Saturday morning edition of WCW Pro, with colleagues Dusty Rhodes and Larry Zbyszko. No attempt was made to promote his farewell appearance, but Gordon, a man whose quick wit was as memorable as his voice, got in the last shot. Responding to a typically sloppy match on that final Saturday, 'The Dean' deadpanned to Zbyszko, 'And they wonder why I'm leaving?'"

It was apparent to those around him that the incident with Eric Bischoff really angered Gordon. He had planned to leave the company, anyway, but he wanted to do so under his own terms. He didn't need a young executive treating him with disdain. The anger Gordon felt even spilled over into conversations with friends and people who had nothing to do with his leaving WCW.

Bill Apter had a good relationship with Gordon for more than 20 years, and he even felt the Solie wrath on the telephone. When Stanley Weston sold

Pro Wrestling Illustrated, the new owner decided to stop sending out complimentary subscriptions to everyone on the list. Gordon had been on that list for years, and was removed with everyone else. When Bill called Gordon one day, he was caught off guard by a rude reception from his old friend. "Thanks a lot," said Gordon.

"For what?" asked Bill.

Gordon screamed back, "I held up that g–damn magazine on television for years and promoted the sh– out of it, and you have the nerve to cancel my comp issues?"

Bill tried to explain that he was totally unaware that Gordon's comp issues had been terminated, but it was no use. Gordon came back with "Bullsh–" and hung up the phone.

As he did so often, Gordon scribbled some words on a handy piece of paper.

Chapter 13: "Don't Make Me Raise My Voice!"

Lunch at Cricketers:
(l to r) Jack Brisco, Gordon Solie raising his voice (electrolarynx),
Brian Blair, and Rocky Johnson

After Gordon worked out his notice period and completed his time with WCW, some blips about his departure appeared here and there in the news.

Jim Ross spoke about the way the WCW executives treated Gordon Solie: "The politics

within WCW ran askew under the lack of leadership by many inept department heads and others, together with some of Turner's right hand men, including Bill Shaw. The lack of product knowledge these men had, and their lack of understanding of what Gordon meant to the business and to the legacy of wrestling on TBS, was astounding. When I became Vice President of Broadcasting for WCW, one of the first things I did was hire Gordon back in a reduced role of doing (on-camera) pitched-to-matches that had already been voiced over and resulted in 'Walter Cronkite-like' commentaries on the wrestling issues of the day. If my memory serves me correctly, Gordon stayed on for a couple of years after I left in late 1992. He should have had a job there for life with all his contributions to TBS and to the business, but the wrestling business has always been about 'what have you done for me lately?' Gordon not being a part of TBS wrestling would be akin to Mel Allen not being a part of the Yankees, or Vin Scully not being part of the Los Angeles Dodgers."

"And Gordon got along well with most of the wrestlers," added Jim. "He always had a joke or two to tell, or a road story from 'back in the day.' Most of the talent who grew up as wrestling fans held Gordon in high esteem, but some of the younger wrestlers cared only about themselves, and could have cared less that they were around the best announcer ever in the business. Old school wrestling people like Gordon didn't have too much time for these defiant, disrespectful young men. They should have tried to watch their television bouts with the sound muted, and then they would have seen just how important the 'voice' telling their story actually was."

Gordon left WCW with a record of good performance, but he did leave an off-the-job situation hanging over his head. While still with WCW, the company changed Gordon's flights from Delta to Kiwi. He wasn't happy about the change. Not only did he and Smoky take vacation trips on Gordon's Delta frequent flyer miles, but a lot of the attendants knew him. He was a regular and they

treated him like one. They would make allowances if he occasionally drank too much, and perhaps even chastise him for lighting a cigarette on a plane. “Gordon used to sneak a wet towel into the bathrooms on the airplanes," said Harley Race. "He used to put the damp towel over the smoke detector and sit in the airplane restroom and smoke cigarettes. Gordon was the reason that the airlines added signs about not tampering with their smoke detectors.”

When Gordon learned that some WCW staff members were still flying Delta, he was doubly ticked off. Chip on his shoulder and all, Gordon got on a Kiwi flight and began belting down some drinks, and then fired up a cigarette. When a flight attendant began to reprimand him, she got a strong dose of verbal abuse from him. When airline personnel complained to WCW about Gordon’s behavior, someone at WCW filed that away in their memory for use at a future date.

As far as Gordon’s career was concerned, in the

minds of his fans, he was officially retired. In late July 1995, Les Thatcher hosted a program called Wrestler's Eye View on WKYN Radio. That particular episode was titled "A Special One Hour Salute to the Dean of Wrestling Announcers, Gordon Solie." Mid-Atlantic wrestling announcer Bob Caudle called into the show and spoke with Gordon about the two of them doing the very first Starrcade together. Fellow wrestling broadcaster Lance Russell joined in and talked about the times he worked with Gordon, and talked about the fun they had with the "900" phone line.

Les mentioned the time he received his NWA "Rookie of the Year" award, an award presented to him by Gordon. Brad Armstrong, another guest on the program, had received the same award from Gordon, only 16 years later. Jim Cornette popped in to remind everyone about his first appearance with the "Dean," and how Gordon was "under-whelmed." Lou Thesz joined the show and sang nothing but praises about Gordon. Thesz was 79 years old at the time, but he was still active in the

wrestling business, teaching martial arts wrestling in Japan.

The show wasn't complete without some stories from the "Dean," and he was reminded of one when Don Curtis joined the program. Don mentioned his old wrestling tag-team partner, Mark Lewin, and in turn, that jogged Gordon's memory. Gordon said that Mark Lewin saved the lives of countless stewardesses. With his partner, Don, sitting next to him on airplanes, Lewin used to motion for a female flight attendant to come over to his seat. When they did, Lewin spoke in a very serious tone: "I have something that I need to tell you." The stage was set for Lewin's next remark. "If I don't get your phone number and address, I'm going to throw myself out the window of this airplane." Don Curtis sat quietly and tried to keep a straight face. Gordon ended the tale by saying that "invariably," female attendants handed Lewin a piece of paper with their contact information as he was walking off the plane.

The show was a great trip through the past, and Gordon was touched by the whole retirement tribute. Of course, Gordon's idea of retirement still included some kind of involvement in the "squared circle." Days before Gordon left WCW, he received phone calls from Hiro Matsuda and Howard Brody, both of whom were involved at the time in a company called World Superstars of Wrestling [WSW], Inc. Hiro was president of WSW and Brody served as executive vice president. Gordon accepted an invitation to attend a show and check out the promotion.

World Superstars of Wrestling [WSW] took raw footage via TV Asahi of Japan (matches from New Japan Pro wrestling) and re-edited the footage in English for worldwide distribution. It wasn't long before Gordon was co-hosting with his old comrade, Sir Oliver Humperdink, on a program known as Ring Warriors. Gordon became senior vice president of Communications and Talent, while Sheldon Goldberg came on board to help with marketing. Ring Warriors had been airing on

Eurosport for just under a year and had become the highest-rated program on the network. The show was broadcast at the time in English, French, Dutch, German, and Spanish. Plans were in the works to air programs on the Internet by February, and Bruno Sammartino was slated to join the announcing team for the internet broadcasts.

In the meantime, WCW surprised everyone on September 11, 1995 when its new show, WCW Nitro, edged out the WWF in the Monday night cable ratings with a 2.5 (3.8 share) versus a 2.2 (3.2 share), respectively (Keller 1). Gordon thought it was great for the industry because, including the replay of Nitro, more than 5,500,000 people watched pro wrestling that night, which was up significantly more than previous Monday nights.

A few weeks later, Gordon attended a gathering in Tampa for the Jack Harris 25th Annual Roast. Proceeds went to the Jack Harris Endowment Scholarship at the University of South Florida.

Harris, a well-known radio and TV personality in Tampa, had Tedd Webb handle the duties of master of ceremonies for guests, which included Gordon, Tom McEwen, Bobby "The Brain" Heenan, the NFL's Sam Wyche, Mayor Dick Greco, Rush Limbaugh, Vince Naimoli of the Devil Rays, Hockey's Phil Esposito, and "Lionel," the former radio-caller-turned-radio-announcer. Gordon prepared some cordial remarks pertaining to the guests and, of course, took his turn roasting Harris. One of Gordon's remarks was, "Jack's so cheap that he has a member of the studio audience introduce him so he doesn't have to pay someone to do it."

Gordon did have a good sense of humor. Former high school classmate, Mary Ziener, was a bit confused about her mailing list because Gordon had moved twice since living at the lake house. She wrote in reference to a class reunion and wanted to know if Gordon was the correct person (Jonard Sjoblom) who attended Southwest High. He replied to Mary, "I am not a correct person, nor

have I ever been, but I am indeed the AKA Jonard Sjoblom who barely graduated with the rest of his class." Gordon finished his response to Mary with pleasant regards.

Late in October 1995, Gordon received new promotional photos from Gil Cabot. In the past, Gil wanted to assist Gordon with wrestling programs, but at the time, he was interested in pursuing a book deal for Gordon. The "Dean" had given some thought to writing a book of his short stories and poetry, and another book about professional wrestling. Knowing that Gil had won the 1994 Acclaim Award, and that Dick Oppenheimer, president of REO National, planned to commercially syndicate Gil's documentary, Gordon thought Cabot might have the right contacts for his book publication.

In addition to his communications with Cabot, Gordon also maintained contact with Lionel, who was still broadcasting on radio in New York. Lionel sent Gordon a copy of an ad for Inside

Secrets on How You Can Enter the Exciting World of Professional Wrestling by Dennis A. Brent with Percy Pringle III. By the time the publication came out, Pringle's persona had changed to "Paul Bearer" and he was managing the Undertaker in the WWF. Some of the input in the Pro Wrestling Career and Educational Series was credited to Jim Cornette, Paul E. Dangerously, Jim Ross, Lance Russell, Ric Flair, Dusty Rhodes, Cactus Jack, Terry Taylor, Michael Hayes, and Gordon Solie.

Things continued to move forward with WSW as Ring Warriors aired on Eurosport and Howard Brody tried to secure more markets. At the time, Gordon and Humperdink's commentary was sent out to Europe, India and Africa. The company produced a nine-page color brochure with a trademarked logo for Ring Warriors on the cover, along with color photos of wrestlers like the Great Muta, Ron Simmons, Jurassic Powers, and Jushin Thunder Lyger. All "Licensing, Merchandising and US Domestic Syndication" was done through Leisure Concepts, Inc. (LCI) and its subsidiary,

The Summit Media Group. The write-up about LCI indicated that the company was a "catalyst for Titan Sports, Inc. and World Wrestling Federation to catapult themselves to the forefront of its industry through licensing and merchandising agreements."

In order to help Ring Warriors acquire programming time on various networks, WSW decided to produce a video to help close the deals. Gordon brought in Gil Cabot for assistance in producing and editing the video. That was a good idea, other than the fact that by April 1996, there was serious friction between Gil Cabot and Howard Brody. As a friend to both, Gordon was stuck in the middle. Cabot claimed Brody was a liar, and Brody suspected that Cabot wanted his job. Gordon muddled through the personality conflict and concentrated on the company's wrestling production.

In Tampa, a developing story that appeared in newspapers was very disturbing to Gordon. He

thought the world of Andy Hardy, a 34-year veteran sportscaster on WTVT CH-13. Hardy had been with Gordon and Eddie Graham during the old days of CWF. In fact, it was Hardy who filmed the events on the day of Gordon's solo flight when Eddie, Don Curtis, and Sam Steamboat hung wings on Gordon. Andy was suffering from cancer and failing finances and depression. After Hardy took a two-week medical leave in March 1996, WTVT asked him to take a five o'clock sportscast time slot, and give up the six o'clock slot, the eleven o'clock slot, and take a reduction in pay. According to Carter Gaddis of the Tampa Tribune, Hardy did not return to his station duties, and as of October 1996, Andy was still waiting to reach some agreement with WTVT. In addition to suffering from emphysema, Gaddis wrote that Hardy underwent chemotherapy for colon cancer and was still waiting for attorneys to settle his dispute with the station. Once the happiest and bubbliest personality in town, Hardy was reduced to a man who could do nothing but sit at home, broken and depressed.

In order to cheer him up and let him know how much he was appreciated, a "Friends of Andy Hardy" benefit was planned for the West Tampa Convention Center. Rick Nafe, head of the Tampa Sports Authority, NFL Coach Sam Wyche, Tom McEwen, Dusty Rhodes, Tedd Webb, Rock Riley, and Gordon all committed to be guest speakers.

While that was in the planning stages, Gordon maintained his board duties for Cauliflower Alley Club. Ella Waldek received praise for her work alongside co-chairman Karl Lauer for the October 26, 1996 banquet and reunion at the Sheraton Grand Hotel in Tampa. CAC honored Judy Glover, Molly McShain, Bonnie Watson, Jack Brisco, Jerry Brisco, Carl Engstrom, Wahoo McDaniel, Angelo Poffo, and Gordon Solie. The first people Gordon thanked were the fans who allowed him into their living rooms (through television). He also thanked Cowboy Luttrall, Eddie Graham, Don Curtis, Tom McEwen, John Heath, and Smoky, of whom he said, "To my wife … who put up with my travel and travails … whilst trying to make a

living.”

In the second week of November 1996, Gordon was contacted by Christopher "Chris" Newman, president of the Wrestling Channel based out of Seattle, Washington. It was his plan to have Les Thatcher interview Gordon and then air the interview in the Bagpipe Report’s Saturday Night Shockwave, an electronic wrestling internet newsletter. Newman’s goal was to have readers send in questions, edit a phone interview with Les and Gordon, and make it available to 600,000 potential internet viewers at the time. He also mentioned the possibility of airing Ring Warriors on the Wrestling News Network. Alas, the idea never came to fruition.

WSW went forward with its plans to become the first company to launch weekly Internet wrestling broadcasts. On December 19, Tim Leahy, Gordon’s attorney, was named as the agent for Ring Warriors to handle any of the legal aspects. Ring Warriors had been seen in a hundred different

countries, but had not aired in the western hemisphere, and the internet was a way to change that. A deal was made with Web-Star (subsidiary of Viatech Communications) out of Boca Raton, Florida and WSW planned to run two weeks of free trials on the Internet as an inducement for subscribers.

The plan for the first Internet wrestling show featured Gordon and Bruno Sammartino calling the matches and Sir Oliver Humperdink conducting the interviews. Howard Brody said both Gordon and Bruno were a little apprehensive about working together as commentators for the new show. Gordon was worried that Bruno may have a big ego, and Bruno was concerned about trying to co-host with wrestling's top broadcaster. As it turned out, the two men got along well and, in no time at all, handled the play-by-play in harmony for the first pro wrestling matches broadcast over the Internet.

In the meantime, Chris Newman wrote to thank

Gordon for his interview with Les Thatcher and offered to build a website for "Solie's Scrapbook." He also offered to build a website for the Cauliflower Alley Club and was still hopeful about incorporating Ring Warriors into his programming.

For a man who was supposed to be retired, Gordon stayed extremely busy. He also kept in contact with friends from his years in entertainment: Jerry Prater, the former director of CWF, had settled into a small town as a radio station manager; Russ Myerson, television executive, who had moved from Florida to the California market; and Gil Cabot, who had plans to promote a book by Gordon, had Gordon slated for a small part in a movie.

Since he was contemplating writing his own book, Gordon spent time investigating wrestling books already on the market. He had his own collection of reading, such as a draft of Lou Thesz's book, a copy of a movie script about Dan

Gable, and a copy of Main Event: The World of Professional Wrestling, accompanied by a personal letter from the author, Roberta Morgan.

Book-related information available on the internet became of interest to Gordon, but he was totally in the dark about computers at the time. Chris Newman mentioned that Charlie Thesz finally got her husband, Lou, started on e-mail, and that he might be a good person for Gordon to practice mailing back and forth with on the computer. Truth be told, Charlie relayed e-mail comments to Lou, jotted down his answers, then sent an e-mail reply.

About the same time, Gordon received e-mails from Earl Oliver who explained that his website, Solie's Vintage Wrestling, was dedicated to his favorite wrestling announcer, Gordon Solie. Answering humorously at first, Gordon responded as a guy named Joe Bonofatsky, an imaginary character that he and Howard Brody joked about. Earl persisted, somewhat confused, because the e-

mail he received listed Gordon and Eileen Solie as the addressees, but was signed by Joe Bonofatsky. In the past, it really ticked-off Gordon if someone used his name to conduct business without permission. However, the website by Oliver was different. Gordon really liked it, and sent Earl Oliver his blessing.

By mid-February 1997, Earl Oliver added some new staff, including Jeremy Hartley, who submitted an article called "Cybercast of Ring Warriors showing the Best of Ring Warriors." Hartley mentioned that Gordon and Sammartino were calling the play-by-play and Humperdink did promos and interviews throughout the Internet wrestling program. He enjoyed listening to Gordon and Sammartino comment on a 1993 NWA match between Masahiro Chono and the Great Muta, and another with Bam Bam Bigelow versus Ricky Choshu. Overall, Hartley thought it was a good show for the Ring Warriors' first Internet program. Unfortunately, the world wasn't quite ready for an Internet wrestling program, and the project was

dropped after the first several shows.

Despite his lack of computer knowledge, Gordon managed to print a copy of the interview with Les Thatcher, which was posted on Earl Oliver's Website, "Solie's Vintage Wrestling." During the interview, Les asked Gordon about the changes that occurred in pro wrestling over the previous three decades. Solie replied:

> I think the cut of the athlete is entirely different. For the most part now, you've got the highly chiseled-up, well-defined distinct formation of the individual, as opposed to the little subtle muscular development that was taking place thirty years ago. I think, too, that the fan has caused a great change in the sport. The "Me Too" generation, or the "Me First" generation, came along and the attention span became very limited, and instant gratification forced wrestling to get into a mode of the sport that was a lot more high impact, and I think a lot less human chess involved.

("Gordon Solie Interview")

Gordon also spoke with Les about his favorite match-ups, past and present. In the "Golden Years" of wrestling, Gordon was partial to the matches between Dory Funk, Jr. and Jack Brisco, Hiro Matsuda and Danny Hodge, and the feud between Eddie Graham and the Great Malenko. In the contemporary matches, Gordon favored Bret Hart and Steve Austin. When the subject of Ring Warriors came up, Gordon expressed his enthusiasm about the quality of wrestling aired on the show.

Gil Cabot, on the other hand, expressed concerns about the show's longevity, and passed those concerns on to Matsuda. Cabot reminded Hiro of the cautions he expressed the year before about changes occurring with networks like ESPN and TNN. He also reminded Hiro of an attitude from Howard Brody at the time, who snickered at Cabot's ideas. Shortly afterward, Disney bought ESPN. Later CNN gobbled up TNN, The

Nashville Network, and CMT, Country Music Television. If they wanted to stay in business, Cabot expressed urgency for World Superstars of Wrestling to get some solid marketing.

News also reached Gordon through Gil Cabot about the possibility of having his book published when a representative from Random House contacted Gil and expressed interest. They had concerns, however, about the negative publicity that might be generated by Gordon's drinking. Evidently, a high-ranking member at WTBS said the company could not lend credibility to Gordon because of his alcohol abuse. Gordon had a good rapport with most of the staff at WCW, and thought about who might have bad-mouthed him. Eric Bischoff was the first name that came to his mind. He also wondered if a complaint in his personnel file in regards to Kiwi International Airlines had been used against him. Either way, Gordon was extremely annoyed that someone from WCW would try to discredit him with a prospective publisher. Random House was still willing to pay

an advance, but they wanted a sample of Gordon's writing before making a commitment.

It became a mute point, however, because no book deal could overcome the problems taking place in Gordon's personal life at the time. Smoky was still battling cancer, which eventually ended up in her brain, and to make matters worse, she developed Stevens-Johnson syndrome, which caused lesions on her skin.

On July 24, 1997, Gordon awoke early in the morning, hand-in-hand with Smoky, only to discover that she had passed away. It was hard for Gordon to believe that she was gone. He never expected her to precede him in death, and the fact that they would no longer be together devastated him. He had an automatic revelation. He never realized how much he loved Smoky … until she was gone. It was hardly original, but it was sincere.

He referred to Smoky's death as "bittersweet"

because some estranged relationships were rekindled. Other relationships remained strained, as evidenced at Smoky's memorial service when one of Gordon's family members said "the wrong parent died first."

After the service, family and close friends met in a private dining room at Malio's. When everyone was seated, Gordon rose to offer a toast to his departed spouse. In typical Solie fashion, Gordon had some notes he had written on a napkin. After he gave the toast, he sat back down and scribbled some more words on the napkin about the tribute to Smoky.

Gordon's family lived comfortably. They had the "Solie" name, which was highly respected in Tampa and beyond. In exchange, they put up with his traveling and the abuse that came along with his alcoholism. Gordon mentioned again and again how he never expected to outlive Smoky. If he had died first, things definitely would have been different, because Smoky's will named only her

biological children, and not Gordon's, as beneficiaries. Gordon took a different outlook on the situation and chose to include all five children in his will.

Regardless of the love-hate relationships, or what Gordon called the "fragmented relationships," it was apparent to those close to Gordon that Smoky's death really knocked the wind out of his sails. The second half of 1997 was a depressing time for Gordon, and his drinking escalated. He lost interest in most of his activities, and he even told Gil Cabot to forget the book deal. By the end of the year, his career with Ring Warriors came to an end when the show lost its outlet in Europe due to network policy changes. Gordon, however, really didn't care.

By early 1998, Gordon began to show signs of adjusting to the life of a widower. When the WWF notified Gordon that they wanted to honor him with a Lifetime Achievement Award, he was genuinely moved and uplifted. He was recognized at WWF

house shows in Miami, West Palm Beach, and Tampa. Eric and Jolin, with their daughters Samantha and Nicole, Pam and Bob, with their sons, Ryan and Jameson, and daughter, Kirstin, and her husband, Michael, along with Jonard, were on hand to watch Gordon receive recognition at Tampa's USF Sundome. In between bouts, Gordon was speaking to Pam and Bob in the lobby when a 12-year-old boy came rushing up. He pulled up his shirt, exposing his chest and abdomen, to reveal large words written on his skin: "STONE COLD STEVE AUSTIN." Pam looked at Gordon and said, "Dad … I'd like you to meet one of my students." Gordon laughed and spoke to the young wrestling fan. It was just the kind of night that Gordon needed. He had a great time with his family, and when his name was announced for the award, he got a nice round of applause from the WWF fans.

Wrestling fans, both young and old, still approached Gordon in stores, restaurants, and other public places, and always greeted him

enthusiastically. One night, he accompanied Pam and Bob to a restaurant in Dade City, Florida. Gordon's grandson, Ryan, managed a restaurant called "Adrian's Grill" while finishing college, and he was going to cook a special entrée for his grandfather. As Bob, Pam and Gordon were seated, a female customer got up from her table and approached them. She stopped to stare at Gordon and blurted out, "I know you. You're on TV. Yes. You're on TV." The lady paused, knelt down on a knee by Gordon's seat, and repeated, "I know you." Bob and Pam sat quietly and waited for a response from Gordon. Jokingly, Gordon replied, "Have you ever seen 'The Price is Right'?"

Everyone laughed, and then Gordon said, "I'm Gordon Solie." Enthusiastically, the lady replied, "Yes, you are! You're Gordon Solie! Yes you are! You're Gordon Solie!" After the lady calmed down, Gordon exchanged pleasantries and gave her an autograph. As soon as the woman left, the owner of the restaurant (Adrian) stopped by the

table with Ryan. Adrian wanted an opportunity to meet the legendary Gordon Solie and chat with him. After a nice visit, Adrian courteously left, after which Ryan served some tasty prime rib.

Gordon still received a fair share of letters and requests from fans. One envelope from a fan contained WCW trading cards and a marker inside. The fan asked if Gordon would please autograph the cards and mail them back. Another letter came from John Dolin of “Light in August Films" in Ontario, Canada. He wanted to book Gordon to help round out bios on wrestlers for an upcoming video documentary called Wrestling with the Past, with shooting expected to begin in late 1998 or early 1999. Dolin thought Gordon’s "ringside perspective would really help round out the show.”

Gordon slowly settled into a single lifestyle, one that was much simpler than previous years. His normal routine was to shower and dress in the morning, then sit on a barstool by the counter

island in the kitchen and read two daily newspapers. While eating a light breakfast, usually toast and coffee, he would periodically pull out a piece of specialty dog food and drop it to his beloved poodle, Aimee. He fed her that way because of her health. Like Gordon, she was heading into the twilight years.

Afterwards, Gordon would sort through bills or correspondence. Although the rest of his house was immaculate, the kitchen table had its own decorum, with stacks of Gordon's fan letters, wrestling business correspondence, personal finances, and articles he had cut from newspapers and magazines. Once he placed items in their proper places on the tabletop filing system, he would play on the computer for a bit. That was always enjoyable, until an error message popped up that he couldn't deal with, at which point he would get frustrated and turn off the computer.

By then, it was time to leave, anyway, so Gordon would be off to Cricketers, his normal lunch

hangout in the Port Richey area. While there, he would have a few double vodkas and food before the hostess brought the Video Trivia game control box to his table. His goal was to accumulate one million points and have his initials, "GS," permanently displayed on the leaders' scroll. Some days, when he felt like eating shredded pork, he would head over to Pit Boss and visit with his young friend, Billy Blekkenk. Besides being a wrestling enthusiast and a friend, Billy smoked turkeys for Gordon during the holidays. At mid-afternoon, Gordon would return home to let Aimee out for a potty break, and then fixed himself a glass of vodka with a splash of cranberry. He always said, "If you're going to mix it, buy the cheap stuff. If you're going to drink it straight, then buy the good stuff."

There were no visible changes in Gordon's drinking habits, but there were signs that his overall health was beginning to deteriorate. He walked with a distinct limp, which had been caused when he fell while getting out of the ring at

the Bayfront Center in 1979. Over time, the injuries to his right ankle had calcified and caused an uneven stride. As he walked, he damaged his left hip by compensating for the bad ankle on his right side. Gordon finally had to undergo surgery for both the hip and the ankle. By 1998, the post-surgery limp was more pronounced. Gordon labored to breathe as well, a condition he attributed to years of heavy smoking and inhaling race track fumes. His son-in-law, Bob Allyn, bought him a new kind of home air purifier, which helped ease his breathing condition. In fact, Gordon liked it so much that he reactivated Gordon Solie Enterprises, Inc. in order to sell air purifiers. He contacted his children and in-laws to see who might want to sell them on a part-time or full-time basis. Gordon figured it would help others breathe better quality air, and he hoped to clear enough profit to pay the company expenses, his American Express bill, and his health insurance premium. The American Express bill was extremely important because he used it almost daily for his lunch and bar tab.

One of Gordon's relatives went behind his back and posed as someone else in order to check out Gordon's deal with the manufacturer. Although it was standard business for Gordon to buy equipment at one price and sell it at a higher price, his relative didn't seem to understand the concept. He called Gordon and told him off, claiming Gordon was a crook for selling the equipment at high prices. Gordon tried to explain that he had corporate costs, advertising, commissions, and other expenses to pay, but he might as well been talking to the wall. To say that Gordon was both angered and distraught would be an understatement.

To calm himself down, Gordon took his pen on May 12, 1998, and wrote the draft of an editorial to his friend and mentor, Tom McEwen. Gordon was surprised that he wasn't consulted after learning that an A&E Television Network program, The Unreal Story of Pro Wrestling, had aired, but after viewing the program, Gordon was glad he hadn't been asked to get involved. Even so,

he shared his thoughts: "The program, as it turned out, was a very superficial scratching of the surface of an athletic contest that has been maligned so many times over the years. I want to thank the writer for his thoughtfulness and candid opinions and I might add; I was inducted into the WCW Wrestling Hall of Fame in May of 1995 (the first non-wrestling competitor so honored) and was the recipient of the Lifetime Achievement award from the WWF in 1998. Those awards were by my peers, and are subsequently more important to me than a shallow interview on an alleged expose and/or alleged history of pro wrestling."

After 48 years of involvement, Gordon had grown accustomed to being sought out for his opinion on the current state of affairs in the wrestling business. He let it be known that a documentary was in the planning stages that would be better than the A&E production. Gordon claimed the new documentary might be "much closer to the truth and answer some questions about the game that had been puzzling people for

years.”

Rumors began to spread via a fax sent on June 2, 1998, that Gordon might be back at the microphone for yet another syndicated wrestling program. Verne Gagne was thought to be in the planning stages of restarting the American Wrestling Association [AWA], and there was mention of Rupert Murdoch and the Fox Network financing the deal. It was rumored that Murdoch tried unsuccessfully to buy a controlling interest in McMahon’s empire and was a good candidate to help with the rebirth of the AWA. Gordon was slated to be the play-by-play man for the initial shows, which included a possible eight-man tournament to determine a new AWA champion. According to the fax, the initial booking committee was to be Gagne, Nick Bockwinkel, Fox Sports president David Hill, and "former WWF booker" Pat Patterson. Talent already signed included Bret Hart and the Road Warriors (the group’s first world heavyweight and world tag team champions, respectively), Shane Douglas, Sabu, and Ken

Shamrock.

Besides the WWF and WCW, another promotion called ECW was making its presence felt, so the AWA definitely would have plenty of competition for TV viewers. According to the Nielson Media Research for the week of June 22-28, five of the top six programs on cable were wrestling shows. The WWF program reached 3.28 million homes on the USA Network (10 p.m.), the Yankee and Mets game (Sunday 8:00 p.m.) traveled to 3.15 million homes on ESPN, and World Championship Wrestling (8:00 p.m.) went into 3.09 million homes on TNT. One of the big drawbacks for the big wrestling companies, however, was the increasing number of injured wrestlers. The “Dean" added his opinion, saying, "Wrestling has gotten off the mat and into the air. That, as much as anything, is behind the increase in injuries" (Ford 12, 14).

On the first anniversary of Smoky’s passing, Gordon met some of his children and

grandchildren for lunch at Carmine's in Ybor City. After lunch, the family visited the mausoleum where Smoky's ashes were contained in an urn. Fond thoughts of her life flashed through Gordon's mind, but the reminder of her passing steered his thoughts toward his own mortality. He had been warned a couple of years before about a lesion on his larynx, at which time the doctor had advised Gordon that it should be tested for cancer.

In the months following the visit to the cemetery, Gordon appeared as if he was just going through the motions of living. He didn't seem to be interested in anything. It was obvious that he needed some kind of a change. Pam sat down and spoke with him in person one afternoon and realized he needed some kind of catalyst to get back him on track emotionally. She persuaded Gordon to attend the 1998 Cauliflower Alley Club banquet and reunion in Elizabeth, New Jersey on October 24. CAC wanted him there, anyway, because they were going to honor him, along with Lou Thesz, Danny Hodge, and Harley Race.

One of the honorees, seven-time NWA world heavyweight champion Harley Race, shared his thoughts about Gordon Solie: "The first thing that comes to mind about Gordon is that he was the voice of wrestling. He could put anyone at ease during an interview. If a wrestler was inexperienced, Gordon started with a series of short questions. Pretty soon, whoever Gordon was interviewing was comfortable to the point that they could elaborate. The guys learned to trust Gordon. If they told him something off the record, they knew that it wouldn't go any further. Gordon had ongoing interaction with the guys, and had the best relationship with more people in the business in his era or since his era. He was a guest in my home in Kansas on more than one occasion, and I considered him a great, personal friend."

The trip and stay at the Cherry Hill Hilton in New Jersey was just what the doctor ordered because Gordon had a great time. During the weekend, he got together with his old friend, Lionel, visited with acquaintances from pro

wrestling and pro boxing, and even made some new contacts. At one point, when Gordon saw Bill Apter step out of an elevator, he turned and walked the other way. It had been over two years since the two had spoken to each other. Fortunately, a lady named Brandi Mankiewicz from the Pro Wrestling Illustrated magazine was with Bill. She went over and spoke to Gordon, and then motioned to Bill. As Bill approached, he went into the old, gay voice routine. Gordon began to laugh and responded with his part of the old routine. Then Gordon gave Bill a handshake and a hug. An old friendship was renewed.

During the reunion, Gordon was approached by David Marquez, a young man trying to make his bones as a wrestling promoter/producer. Gordon also spoke with Chris Hansen, vice president of Marquee Enterprises, Inc. The conversations with Marquez and Hansen revolved around a company named Squared Circle, Inc., parent company to World Legion Wrestling. Bill Ash and Karl Lauer headed up the management team and hoped to get

the World Legion Wrestling programs telecast on 210 stations across the country.

Soon after Gordon returned to Tampa, he received a contract from World Legion Wrestling in regard to anchoring the broadcasts. He also made a decision regarding his health. Gordon agreed to have the tests performed on his throat, and they were scheduled for November 12, 1998. His daughter, Pam, made arrangements to take time off work and drive him to and from the hospital. The night before the procedure, the phone rang at Pam's home. It was her dad. "There's no reason for you to come over tomorrow," said Gordon.

"Why not?" asked Pam.

"I've canceled the surgery," stated Gordon.

Obviously concerned, Pam asked, "Why did you do that?"

In a straight-forward, almost unemotional tone of voice, Gordon answered, "What's the point. My

Dad (Frank) only lived until he was seventy."

Despite her frantic pleas to get her dad to reconsider, Gordon would not budge. "I really appreciate your concern," Gordon told Pam, "but it's done. I canceled the appointment." Much later, when Gordon showed Pam his medical records, she discovered that he had canceled the exploratory surgery weeks before he called her. In fact, he had canceled quite a few doctor appointments in the months prior to that phone call.

Instead of attending to his medical needs, Gordon chose to pursue the offer to announce for World Legion Wrestling. What Gordon had been hoping for had finally come about. He was being given another opportunity to call the play-by-play for professional wrestling. The fee he was being paid for each show wasn't anything major, but he did have a small amount of money left after paying his expenses. With encouragement from his family, Gordon headed to Springfield, Missouri in November 1998 to tape three shows. Besides any

broadcast duties, Chris Hansen wanted Gordon to be available to the media because Gordon's persona would help increase the gate for a house show scheduled at Remington's Entertainment Complex. The following day, November 23, the Springfield News-Leader pictured two of the wrestlers involved in the show, Jeff Jett and Dan Severn, along with an article about the new wrestling promotion.

By December, negotiations were under way to launch the program on television stations, with projections for a February debut. Meanwhile, David Marquez was seeking membership for World Legion Wrestling into the National Wrestling Alliance. Over the next couple of months, Gordon made trips to Missouri every third Sunday for TV tapings and basic setup for the promotion. Although his voice was not as strong as his days with CWF and GCW, Gordon could still do play-by-play with the best of them.

He could still drink with the best of them, too.

David Marquez remembered nights when he and Harley Race literally carried Gordon to his hotel room and placed him on the bed. Gordon still had the uncanny ability, however, to look like a new man by morning. He could go right back into his announcing for a studio match and not miss a beat. At one particular taping, Gordon smoked intermittently while broadcasting the matches, and drank glasses of water from a nearby pitcher, as usual. Everything went smoothly and he finished the matches. When it was time to do the promos, Gordon sounded strange. He said silly things, like, "Coming up on the sexy Fox Sports Network," and added other words that were definitely not appropriate. Marquez asked people nearby if they knew what was wrong with Gordon. Someone replied that Gordon was okay. The only think he had to drink while doing the play-by-play was a pitcher of water. Little did anyone know … early that morning, Gordon had substituted vodka for the water and had consumed the entire contents of the pitcher during the broadcast.

In between the trips to Missouri, Gordon and a man named Douglas Daudt began to lay out plans along for a documentary called Inside the Squared Circle: A History of Championship Wrestling. The basic format was for a two-hour program with discussions on territories (specifically CWF, GCW, and WCW). Specific topics included Ray Gunkel, Jim Crockett, Ted Turner, Paul Jones, Jim Barnett, Vince McMahon's deal with Turner, Bruiser Brody's murder, life on the wrestling circuit, steroids, sex in wrestling, satanic references in wrestling, a never-before-seen Lou Thesz match, and more.

Gordon enjoyed the trips for World Legion Wrestling, and liked working with Harley Race and Karl Lauer. The young guys like David Marquez and Rick Thomas were learning, even though at times, they made mistakes that frustrated Gordon. Just as he had recognized the potential in Mike Tenay, back in the WCW days, Gordon thought David Marquez from World Legion Wrestling also had a future in professional

wrestling.

In March 1999, WLW produced programs with appearances by "Tiger" Treach Phillips, "Pretty Boy" Kevin Sharpe, "Cowboy" Bob Orton, the Atomic Dogg, Big Sky, Malia, Beautiful Bobby, Brandi, Little Kato, The Drill Instructor, Blade Beaudroux, Bill Nasty, and Johnny Jett. The talent was beginning to come around, but the money was slow to come in, and with Gordon's health declining, he began telling close friends that he didn't know how much longer he could participate. Just two months earlier, he had celebrated his 70th birthday.

Much like Ring Warriors, Gordon preferred the WLW older style of wrestling. For the most part, he had been reluctant to criticize the contemporary professional wrestling shows. He suddenly felt it necessary, however, to speak out against the homosexual themes, and the crucifixion angle, that had been utilized on some of the wrestling programs. All the years spent by Gordon lending

credibility to professional wrestling seemed to have been in vain, but every once in a while, there appeared to be a glimmer of hope. He absolutely loved it when staff writer Thomas Frank of Newsday quoted the wrestler known as Mankind in a March 30 article:

> Let me tell you something that really tees me off … I mean really burns me up. It's you people who sneer at pro wrestling and cry, "Oh, but it's so fake." You geeks would rather blow a hundred bucks to watch some wimp like Edward Villela dance around than see bone-crushing wrestling action. Well, I've got news for you: Swan Lake is fixed, and the duck gets it in the end every time. (B6)

As Cactus Jack, Mick Foley had a cult following, but as Mankind in the WWE, he seemed to be bigger than life. And the bone-crushing stuff he spoke about was no joke. Foley told Thomas Frank that he had four concussions, broke his nose twice, dislocated his jaw several times, had teeth

knocked out, had part of his right ear amputated or torn off, broke his wrist, suffered three separated shoulders, broke seven ribs, torn his abdominal muscle off the bone, tore his meniscus, had a screw holding part of his knee together from a strained MCL, had over 300 stitches, three herniated discs, and a bruised kidney (B6, B7). That's how fake the business was to Mick Foley.

On March 31, 1999, Gordon got word that Rick Thomas and David Marquez closed their second sale for WLW distribution: 104 first-run, one-hour programs which would air on Pan-European Cable. Plans were also under way for 13 weeks of television programs under a different name, WLW Beat Down, which would include Gordon, Harley Race, Derrick Stone, the Iron Sheik, Karl Lauer, Larry Hennig, and the Atomic Dogg.

Professional wrestling seemed to be on an upswing. Cable network ratings were high. Attendance records were being set at house shows. New promotions were popping up all over the

country. Wrestling promotions were selling movies, books, and merchandise. No one was prepared for what happened on May 23, 1999 at Kemper Arena in Kansas City, Missouri. As wrestler Owen Hart was lowered from the ceiling to the ring by harness and rappel line, an entrance he'd used before, the release mechanism opened prematurely and he fell to his death. It was shocking, tragic, and horrifying … just to name a few of the possible descriptions of the catastrophe. Gordon spoke out and said that Hart's death was unnecessary. "This stuff we're seeing today is so far removed from wrestling. The risk-taking element is too high" Johnson 4).

Just four days before Hart's death, wrestlers gathered in Norwood, Ohio with Les Thatcher for an event to benefit the family of another deceased wrestler, Brian Pillman. Although Gordon knew Brian, it wasn't a trip he was able to make. His throat was gradually swelling, making it harder and harder to breathe. Even with the problem, Gordon stubbornly refused surgery. The thought of

an invasive throat procedure, especially to someone who made a living with their voice, was something he really didn't want to consider. Not only that, but he was contemplating two trips: one with granddaughter Nikki to Las Vegas, and the other with his grandson Jameson to Australia. Those plans became irrelevant as his health continued to deteriorate.

In the spring of 1999, Gordon wrote some notes for World Legion Wrestling. He had been asked for his feedback on improvements for the WLW programs, so Gordon made the following recommendations for the WLW televised programs: a better set, better lighting, either Gary Capetta or a Spanish-speaking female as co-host, updated clothing with blazers including logos, lapel mikes, more WLW signage, walkie-talkies, collapsible steps with railing, and a table skirt with web-site logo and information.

Geographically, Pam and her husband, Bob, lived the closest to Gordon of any family members,

and they were about an hour away. They began a weekly dinner on Wednesday nights with Gordon. One week, they would bring a grouper dish. The next, they would have spaghetti. One Wednesday evening in September 1999, Gordon canceled because he just didn't feel up to it. The same thing happened on Thursday night, and when Pam spoke to her dad on Friday evening, he sounded very weak. He wasn't up to having company and he didn't feel strong enough to leave the house.

Bob and Pam told Gordon they were coming over to get him and take him to the emergency room. While waiting for the Allyns to arrive, Gordon's long-time friend, Jane Edenfield, visited with Gordon and watched over him. After being admitted to Countryside Mease Hospital's emergency room, Gordon immediately began inhalation therapy/treatment. After a 90-minute treatment in the emergency room, Gordon began to feel better, so he sat up, pulled out the breathing mouthpiece, and ripped off the tape and corresponding wires attached to his skin. Seeing

the frustration in her dad's face, Pam asked him, "What the heck are you doing?"

Gordon replied, "I'm getting out of this fu–ing place." He buttoned his shirt, stood up, and headed for the exit. An emergency room physician noticed Gordon and said, "Hey, you can't just get up and leave." Gordon walked right past the physician and continued out the door. Pam, shaking her head in frustration, turned to the physician and said, "I guess he can."

Eric had driven two hours to get to the hospital because of the emergency, and arrived in time to try and convince his dad to stay, but as Eric said, "Gordon's going to do what Gordon's going to do."

Part of Gordon's frustration went back to the time he spent with Smoky in the hospital. Being back in the hospital triggered the re-release of sad emotions, and he did not want to be in a hospital for any reason. As it was, he was reminded of

Smoky's death the first thing every day because he woke up between four and five o'clock in the morning, which was around the time that she passed away.

Articles appeared in newspapers about Gordon's declining health, his absence from the forefront of pro wrestling, and his comments about some of the distasteful themes airing on televised wrestling programs. During an interview with David Whitley in October 1999, Gordon's criticisms became a little sharper on the industry: "It's become athletic pornography. I'm not a prude, but I don't think we need to be exposing our kids to what they're doing" (C9).

With a little more time on his hands than in previous years, Gordon was able to spend more time reading. He sat comfortably in his leather chair, with a vodka and cranberry next to him, a full pack of cigarettes readily available, and Aimee in his lap. Besides perusing industry mail, get-well cards from wrestling friends like Paul

Bearer, and well-wishing letters from fans, Gordon had time to contemplate his health issues. Ultimately, he decided to seek more testing, and had Pam drive him to outpatient testing. The results came back positive for cancer of the larynx. The best course of action seemed to be the surgical removal of Gordon's larynx … at least, if he wanted to continue living. Gordon chose instead to keep his natural voice, even in its weakened state, for as long as possible.

Even with the health concerns, Gordon managed to keep his sense of humor. While Bob and Pam were at Gordon's house one day, he pulled out a contractual agreement sent to him for a television appearance. He knew his announcing days were over, particularly because his once-booming voice was weak, but he looked at Bob and Pam and said, "Hey, do you want to have some fun?" Gordon proceeded to read the terms of the agreement, and asked Bob and Pam, "How much should we increase the fee?" Item by item, whether it was a royalty clause, accommodations, or whatever,

Gordon raised everything off the charts. When he finished, he inserted the contract into an envelope and dropped it into the mailbox.

A couple of weeks later, when the Allyns were over for the Wednesday night feast, Gordon said, "Do you want a good laugh?" He threw down the returned contract on the island in the kitchen and said, "They accepted all my terms." They all laughed. Gordon shook his head in kind of a comical disbelief … but he was truly flattered.

Gordon felt thrilled again on October 30, 1999, when Chokehold Radio Show on WVOJ AM-970 Radio informed him during an interview that he was the first announcer inducted into their Hall of Fame. It was a brief interview because Gordon was having a hard time speaking. Although his words were clear, the volume of his voice had been reduced to a whisper. Joe Capone, Tom "Chokester" Motley, and Hallie "Wrestling Doc" Wilson hosted the interview segment, and treated Gordon with total reverence. Gordon informed

them that it would be his last interview, regardless of whether it was radio or TV. Gordon followed up with the fact that he felt honored as a “non-competitor" to be inducted into another wrestling Hall of Fame. When asked during the interview about his start with the grapplers, Gordon explained that he recognized early on that the fans tuned in to see the wrestlers, not to see Gordon Solie. He decided to do everything in his power to make the wrestlers look good, and, in turn, he figured that would help increase his own popularity.

That interview was, in fact, Gordon’s last speaking interview.

The accolades and letters kept pouring in from almost every state in the nation. People wrote to thank Gordon for his contributions to wrestling and charity. Vicki Moore contacted Gordon with a well-intentioned, seven-page, handwritten letter. She had seen two articles about Gordon in the paper, and wrote:

> … I realized that the first article was written on October 24th, as luck would have it, I had mistakenly thrown out that paper, something I would never do, is throw out the sports section, without first reading through it, but we had company from Ohio, and when I have company anything is possible for me to do, I get a little crazy. I live in Brooksville (Florida), and we only get garbage pickup once a week, luckily for me, I went through six bags of garbage, before finally finding Mr. McEwen's article. Thank heavens the article was in very good shape, so I cut it out …

Ms. Moore proceeded to share her countless memories of CWF, Eddie Graham, the Great Malenko, and the times she met Gordon in person. Others who read McEwen's articles either contacted Gordon directly like she did, or responded to McEwen at the Tampa Tribune.

A.L. Graham wrote to McEwen about a group of students from Tomlin Junior High School, who

used to listen to Gordon on the radio back in the early 1950s. They mailed in requests, one of which was to hear Gordon sing a duet of "There Stands the Glass" with country-western singer Webb Pierce. One day, when Pierce showed up as a guest in the radio booth, Gordon obliged. That particular song, released in 1953, topped the country charts and became Pierce's biggest hit. It is regarded as one of the country's classic drinking songs.

At seven o'clock a.m. on Saturday, November 6, 1999, the phone rang at the Allyn household. It was Gordon, and although Pam could barely understand him, she knew he needed to go to the hospital. Unfortunately, Gordon could not get there by ambulance. He lived in the southern part of Pasco County, and the ambulance services there only transported people to medical facilities within Pasco County. Gordon's medical facility wasn't far away, but it was in the northern part of Pinellas County, so he was out of luck. The Allyns were on the road in less than two minutes and Bob made the

usual 60-minute drive in about 35 minutes.

It was déjà vu as Gordon entered the emergency room and began breathing treatments. By mid-afternoon, however, Gordon was admitted as an overnight patient and the staff ran a battery of tests. After reviewing the basic work-up on Gordon, the attending physician approached the Allyns and said, "The first thing I need to do is to make arrangements to have him admitted to a detox facility."

Pam replied, "You don't understand ..."

The doctor came back sternly with, "No, you don't understand."

After a few similar exchanges, Bob piped up and said, "You don't understand. That is not going to happen. Please make him as comfortable as possible until Dr. Alidina arrives." The physician didn't agree with the decision, but complied with the Allyns' request.

Eric and Jolin arrived at the hospital early that evening. Finally, around 9:30 p.m., Dr. Alidina arrived in Gordon's room. Bob and Jolin waited in the corridor while the surgeon spoke to Gordon, Eric and Pam. Gordon asked Alidina if he was going to schedule his surgery within the next two or three weeks. Alidina replied something to the effect, "Gordon, without an immediate operation, you'll be dead by Monday morning."

With no time to waste, the surgery was performed on Sunday morning. The family was relieved when Alidina told them that Gordon's larynx removal went well, and he thought they had removed all the cancer from surrounding areas. The family was later allowed a brief visit with Gordon in the recovery room. Grandchildren, Jameson, Samantha, and Nicole brought in writeable boards so their grandfather could communicate with the family. Gordon took one of the boards and wrote his first post-surgery note. With a big smile on his face, he then turned the board so everyone could see his words, "I want a

double vodka."

Gordon didn't find things quite so funny a couple of days later when a hospital staff member delivered an electrolarynx to his hospital room. At first, Gordon didn't want a thing to do with it. Understandably, he was totally frustrated to be without a voice. Other than that, he amazed the surgeon and the hospital staff. With a patient like Gordon, a person who drank heavily, plans are normally made in advance to deal with post-surgery complications, such as hallucinations or anger from withdrawal, even to the point of applying restraints when necessary. Gordon surprised the entire medical team because he never displayed those types of behavior. Yes, he wanted to have a drink, and he made an occasional reference in the presence of his family, but he didn't want the hospital staff to see that side of his suffering.

When his hospital confinement came to an end, Gordon was transferred to an extended-care

facility in Dunedin, Florida. Upon his release, Pam picked up her father and assumed she would drive him directly to his home. As she began to pull away, she noticed the familiar Solie frown, and asked what was wrong. Gordon had to scribble on the board, but managed to explain that he was upset about his release time. The facility released him around 10:30 a.m., and they were having a wine and cheese party in his wing at noon. He hadn't had a drink for eight days, and he was upset that they hadn't waited to discharge him until after the party.

It stood to reason that with his throat still healing from surgery, the last thing Gordon should consume was alcohol. That didn't really matter to Gordon. He made it very clear to Pam that he was going straight to his normal hangout, and he was going to have a drink.

Although Gordon continued his alcohol consumption after his surgery, he did have to deal with his smoking habit. He may have snuck an

occasional cigarette in private, but he was not about to be seen smoking in public. That would have meant sucking on a cigarette through the new hole in his neck, and Gordon thought that would be tacky. His other big concern was that he had to learn how to communicate again. At first, it was impossible to understand him when he tried to speak with his new voice, the electrolarynx. The messages he left on the answering machine at Pam's house sounded like mechanized gibberish. That's most likely the norm after that type of medical procedure, but it came out like "Ruerr … ruerr … ruerr … ruerr." His grandson, Jameson, jokingly told him that it was like trying to figure out what "R2D2" was saying in Star Wars.

There were moments when Gordon got overwhelmed and frustrated when someone asked him to repeat the same phrase eight or nine times in a row. He shook his head, kind of like President Nixon did when Nixon said, "I'm-mmmm not a crook." Gordon's words were a little different. While shaking his head, he could force out enough

air for an audible, "Ohhhhhh,fu– you.”

After calming down and laughing at himself, he would always try again. As Gordon began to adapt to using the electrolarynx, more of his words and phrases became understandable. Jameson told his grandpa that he had improved, and that the sounds had changed. They were more like words from the robot in the TV show Lost in Space, when his computerized voice spewed out "Danger. Danger, Will Robinson." Grandpa Gordon appreciated the humor and the compliment.

Normally, Gordon spent Thanksgiving with Smoky’s relatives, but while he was still in the hospital, he had told everyone that he was going to Bob and Pam’s house for the day. Bob made the two-hour round trip to get Gordon and bring him to the house. By the time they arrived, Eric and his family were there, which brought the number for dinner to 13 or 14 people. Before the meal began, Gordon sat down with Pam and Eric and shared some very bad news. Before he had his surgery,

doctors had told him they had a 50-50 chance of getting the cancer out completely, but the carcinoma in his throat had metastasized. All of a sudden, words like cardiac arrhythmia, alcohol abuse, T3, stage four, or laryngeal carcinoma had little meaning. Gordon was terminally ill … and he had only six months to live.

Despite his predicament, Gordon said he was going to make a public appearance. Hiro Matsuda, a man Gordon respected as a wrestler and teacher, had passed away on November 27, 1999. Gordon said nothing would stand in the way of him paying his respects to Matsuda. Hiro was known internationally, but he had a special place in the hearts of Tampa wrestling fans. In the ‘60s, he had been a hated villain, but he had later become extremely popular with the fans, and his training regimen for new wrestlers was second to none. Brian Blair remembered attending Hiro’s grueling wrestling class. Of the 103 students who entered a class with Hiro, only three of them finished: Brian Blair, Hulk Hogan, and Paul Orndorff (McEwen

1).

Amidst the sentiment about Hiro's death and Gordon's failing health, more memories of CWF's glory days were passed on in a story about Ted Peters, the owner of a restaurant called "Ted Peters Famous Smoked Fish." According to Jeff Klinkenberg of the St. Petersburg Times, Ted had been serving fish to his customers for more than fifty years. In the article, Klinkenberg included other some tales about Ted's mother, Matilda, who helped open the restaurant.

> Although Matilda only stood four feet ten inches tall, she didn't let her petite frame stand in her way when she was upset. On one occasion, she was angry with a rude worker at the restaurant, so Matilda chased the employee down the block and was subsequently arrested on assault charges. At the wrestling matches, she was ejected from the arena one night for heaving beverages at one of the "bad guys." Klinkenberg added

another note about the diehard wrestling fan when he wrote: "Matilda prized three photographs: professional wrestler Eddie Graham, wrestling announcer Gordon Solie — and Jesus Christ. Two photos were autographed" (3D).

Even with his health issues, life appeared to be improving for Gordon. By the time Christmas rolled around, Gordon had regained some of the weight he had lost, and he was communicating much better through the electrolarynx. Along with Howard Brody and Martin Yoffe, he was making plans to stage NWA wrestling cards at stadiums, arenas, fair grounds, race tracks, and military bases, and hoped to tailor each event to the budget and needs of the interested parties.

Sadly, problems arose when one of his last family holiday get-togethers went awry. When Pam and Bob stopped by Gordon's house, he was all worked up. "I got into an argument with Jonard at Eric's house. He shoved me across the room and

wanted to fight me. At that point, Eric chased him out of the house. Now he's leaving nasty messages on my answering machine, and he even sent me a fax. Jonard claims I'm a coward and that I'm letting other people fight my battles," fumed Gordon. Even though Gordon was 70 years old, was hobbling around with a bad leg, had a permanently affixed breathing hole in his neck, and was dying from cancer, he still had to deal with his "fragmented relationships." Gordon said his bond with Jonard was a love-hate relationship, much like the one he had with his stepfather, Pierre. He pondered over some words he penned years before.

It is dirty and pure
It is gargantuan and amoebic
It is kindness and ruthlessness
It is laughter and tears
It is here now … gone in an instant
It is confusion and clarity
It is truth and deceit
It is trust completely

It is demanding and giving
It is outward and retiring
It is frightening and reassuring
It is my dream and my nightmare
It is my ecstasy and my tears
It is my pride and my humiliation
It is my son
My offer of immortality
By Gordon Solie © 2001 by Pamela S. Allyn

Fortunately, January 2000 was a much better month. When Dotty Curtis called and said she and Don wanted to drive down from Jacksonville to see him over New Year's weekend, Gordon attempted to dissuade her. They were such close friends that Dotty refused to take no for an answer. She and Don came for a visit, anyway. On their first night there, Don went to bed early, but Gordon and Dotty watched TV and talked until three o'clock in the morning. She had been Gordon's confidant ever since Smoky passed away, and it was another opportunity for Gordon to vent his

feelings. The next morning, Dotty spent time in the kitchen making Gordon the home-cooked food he loved.

To his surprise, Gordon found himself in church the next day for the Investiture of one of his acquaintances — Father Michael Divine. Dotty described their arrival at the ceremony: "We (Don, Gordon and me) looked like three bad kids who had just been scrubbed behind the ears and put into their Sunday go-to-church clothes. As the ceremony was about to begin, Gordon tried to whisper something to me through his electrolarynx. I couldn't understand a word he said, so I looked at him and sarcastically replied, 'Could you speak a little louder?' Of course, that was all it took to make us all laugh for a while. Luckily, we had calmed down by the time the ceremony started."

Like Gordon's family, Dotty tried to encourage Gordon when he got frustrated in his attempts to speak through the electrolarynx. She told him, "If anyone can raise that electrolarynx to their throat

and speak, it certainly is you. It's not much different than what you did all your adult life with a microphone."

Later that month, his 71st birthday celebration was as good as ever, especially since his sister, Gaye, and her husband, George Swenson, came to visit for a few days. There was a dinner party for Gordon with old friends like Bob Vallee, Don and Dotty Curtis, and another party at the house with the family, which included Gordon's four great grandchildren: Kaleigh, Jakob, and twins Alec and Benjamin. By then, he was speaking so well and so much that his family jokingly threatened to remove the batteries from his electrolarynx.

The birthday party was just one of many opportunities during Gordon's illness for him to spend time with his family. Dannie and her fiancé, Bob, came down from Jacksonville. Greg and Sheila came in from Virginia with their children, Matthew and Tarah. Jonard came up and brought Tedd Webb for a visit. Eric and Jolin brought

Samantha and Nicole for occasional weekend stays. In addition to the weekly dinners with Gordon, Pam and Bob made weekend visits for breakfast or supply runs. Their sons, Ryan and Jameson, accompanied them on many of those trips and were able to spend time with their grandfather. The only time Gordon preferred not to have people around was on Sunday afternoons when NASCAR was on television.

Gordon refused to live with any of his children, although they invited him to do so, and he outright rejected any idea of moving to a retirement home. The newspaper and Internet articles portrayed Gordon as a lonely, old man who lived in his home with his poodle, Aimee … and that's the way Gordon wanted it. Again, it was like Eric had said … "Gordon's going to do what Gordon's going to do."

As far as being lonely, Gordon missed Smoky, but he got plenty of attention. Billy Blekkenk stopped by once a week to bring Gordon his

barbecue shredded pork, and Gordon joined the regulars at Cricketers on most other days. He and his long-time friend, Bob Vallee, got together for lunches, and Gordon met regularly with Brian Blair. It worked out well because Gordon helped Brian with some wrestling terms for Brian's book, Smarten Up! Say It Right. Brian often brought other old friends along. Jack Brisco was usually there, and at another lunch, they were joined by Lou Thesz, Don Curtis, and Dotty Curtis.

On another occasion, Gordon met Brian, Jack, and Rocky Johnson for lunch at Cricketers. During the visit, when the chatter got a little loud, Gordon suddenly barked, "Don't make me raise my voice!" When everybody turned to stare at Gordon in the sudden silence that ensued … he did exactly that. Gordon lifted his electrolarynx over his head. Everybody in the restaurant broke out in laughter.

Although he was still able to go out and have a good time with friends and family, Gordon's health began to worsen. Knowing his time on earth was

growing short, he did not want to die without being at peace with his family and friends. In a last-ditch effort to resolve some issues, Gordon met one relative for lunch. After listening to the person gripe and complain for 45 minutes, Gordon paid the tab and said, "I apologize for anything, real or imaginary, that you feel I may have done to you." He could do no more.

Gordon resigned his position with the NWA Florida board and, for the first time in 50 years, severed his last official ties to professional wrestling. He said he had called the action for more than 25,000 matches, but that part of his life was over. It was time to focus on doing what he could to stay as healthy as possible for as long as he could. That scenario did not include chemotherapy and radiation treatments. Gordon absolutely refused to consider them. He thought the quality of life was much more important, and even after enduring the agonizing treatments, he might only gain a couple of months of life. He said, "I want quality, not quantity. I'm not going to get even

sicker just so I can die." In his opinion, that's what happened to everyone else he knew who had contracted cancer. Milt Spencer went through chemo; so did Smoky and they both suffered and died. To Gordon, it just wasn't worth it.

Hospice began to visit his house on a regular basis. Gordon even checked with a few of the euthanasia societies, and he kept a large bottle of morphine in case the pain became more than he could handle. If his health deteriorated to that point, he could swallow the contents of the bottle and drift off to a never-ending sleep. Pain definitely was a factor in Gordon's state of mind. The cancer had gradually moved from his neck and was beginning to attack his brain. Quite often, he would drop his head forward and hold it in the palms of his hands, bracing himself as the jolts of pain shot through his neck and into his brain. When the pain subsided, he would raise his head and proceed with the business at hand. The wrestlers would have been proud of Gordon. In his battle with cancer, he was as tough as any of them ever

were in the ring.

The one thing Gordon did tire of was hearing about his deteriorating health from his doctors. When they discovered three more tumors, they wanted to investigate with a fine-needle aspiration biopsy, but Gordon didn't want anything to do with the procedure. Instead, he called the doctor and canceled his next few appointments.

Regardless of the pain, Gordon kept driving to Cricketers for his daily lunch and cocktails. And for those who may have wondered, he did make the million-point club on their trivia game.

He enjoyed having the family at his home, but he avoided having other visitors. The swelling in his throat and neck had increased, and the drainage from his nose and throat was embarrassing for him at times.

One of the highlights for Gordon during this time was a lunch arranged by Brian Blair at Malio's.

Gordon prayed that he would look decent and have a good day, and not look like a sick, drooling, old man. Wade Boggs, the legendary Boston Red Sox third baseman, was going to be there, along with Brian, Jack Brisco, and Steve Keirn. Although Gordon and Wade were both Tampa celebrities, they had never met until that day. Boggs said he and Gordon began talking around 11:45 a.m. The next thing he knew, it was almost three o'clock in the afternoon. God answered Gordon's prayers. He had a good day and he had a great time with the guys.

On Father's Day, June 18, 2000, Gordon was at home, enjoying the company of two of his children, Pam and Eric, their spouses, and three grandchildren. A very poignant moment took place when Pam brought out an old photo album to share with her dad. The shiny, black album, decorated with inlaid mother of pearl, was a souvenir of Gordon's military time spent in Okinawa, Japan. It had been more than 40 years since Gordon had seen the album, but he instantly recognized it. As

he slowly turned back the cover to reveal the first page of photos, his facial expression mirrored his thoughts. He began to relive a past life as he looked at photos of a proud father holding a little, blond-haired girl's hand and cradling a small, dark-haired baby boy. He saw photos of Christmas with visiting grandparents, snapshots of birthday parties, a picture of a smiling, little girl baking her daddy a cake, family pets, and the Triumph he drove after his divorce from Betty.

As he gazed at the images from his past, all Gordon could say, over and over, was, "Oh, my." With the turn of each page, his eyes brimmed with tears. As father and daughter looked over their past, Pam suddenly felt badly about dredging up old memories. "I'm so very sorry, Dad. I never meant to upset you," she said. Wiping the tears from his eyes, Gordon looked up at his daughter and softly said, "It's okay. I'm the one who is sorry. I am so sorry."

During their time together, Gordon mentioned

that Hulk Hogan was talking about planning an August party in Gordon's honor, and that Hogan intended to invite a lot of people from professional wrestling. Realizing the end was near, and not sure his health could handle a big gathering, Gordon had to respectfully decline.

Pam and Bob continued to drive down to New Port Richey each Wednesday for dinner. However, during their visit on July 26, 2000, Gordon hardly ate. He coughed and gagged, and kept excusing himself from the table. He also was very angry with Howard Brody, with whom he had spent several hours preparing his final statement. He faxed it to Howard with the understanding that it was to be released only upon Gordon's death. Howard misunderstood and posted it on the Internet. Gordon was livid about the premature release of his statement, but there seemed to be something else bothering him. Apparently, Gordon knew more than the Allyns that night about how little time he really had left.

Normally, the Allyns headed home around 9:30 p.m. They had to get up in the mornings at 5:45 a.m., so they liked to be in bed by eleven o'clock. On that particular evening, it was after 10:30 p.m. when they left. Bob said good night to Gordon and walked outside to the car.

Pam stayed with Gordon for another few moments and said, "I love you, Dad." Gordon put his electrolarynx on top of the entertainment center and mouthed the words, "I love you, too, babe." He turned, shuffled away, and headed down the hallway to his bedroom. An uneasy feeling overcame Pam as she watched her dad turn the corner into his bedroom. His electrolarynx was still on the entertainment center, and his vodka with a splash of cranberry drink was still sitting on the island in the kitchen.

The next evening, the Allyns were late returning home from work. When Pam phoned her dad, there was no answer. She was genuinely concerned because they normally spoke at least once a day.

Pam figured her dad had fallen asleep while watching television in his favorite living-room chair. When she awoke early the next morning, Pam again tried to reach her dad by phone. To her dismay, the only response was the answering machine. Pam immediately placed a call to Hospice to let them know she couldn't get in touch with her father. The ladies from Hospice were much closer to Gordon and went right over to the house. A short while later, one of the women called Pam and said they were looking through a window and could see Gordon lying on the bedroom floor. After entering the house, the Hospice worker called Pam again.

The "Dean of Professional Wrestling Announcers" was dead.

Pam and her son, Jameson, drove to her dad's house. As she walked in, she noticed that the electrolarynx was right where Gordon had left it, and his drink glass was still on the island counter in the kitchen. The official death notice listed

Gordon as having passed away on Friday morning, July 28, 2000, but more than likely, it had taken place on Thursday. It really was a moot point because, as a terminal hospice patient, Gordon was exempt from an autopsy.

Gordon always said he wanted to live long enough to see the new millennium, which he did. He wanted to outlive his father who lived to be 70 years old, and he did that by making it to the age of 71. He also wanted to live long enough to see the Tampa Bay Buccaneers win the Super Bowl. That did not happen. Shortly before he died, however, Gordon said he actually had three regrets: not being there for Pam and Jonard when they were children, Smoky's death, and that he never gave up alcohol.

Gordon's thoughts in his remaining days were expressed in his final statement:

> There are times when words cannot properly define one's thoughts or emotions. With all

that has happened in my life over the past several months, this is certainly one of those times.

First and foremost I want to thank those of you who have passed along your well wishes. They are deeply appreciated. And considering the reason I have decided to deliver this statement, it is quite comforting to know during my final days here that I have had such a positive effect on so many of you.

With that said, I also want to thank each of you for allowing me to be a small part of your lives, even if it might have been for just a few hours each week. And I want to thank you for allowing me to tell you a story; a story that I never got tired of ... a story that could be told ten thousand times ... a story that could have a different ending each and every time it was told.

To be quite honest, when my wife 'Smoky' passed away more than two years ago, it could have been very easy for me to throw in the towel. But that wasn't me. Then the throat

cancer came, and again it could have been very easy to give up. But again, that wasn't me. The bottom line is that I've never been a quitter. As a matter of fact at one point I thought I had this damn disease beat. Obviously I didn't.

While the good Lord only knows how much time I actually have left here in my final days, I ask that you not grieve for me, but rather remember me fondly as you would an old friend. In my eyes I lived a full and satisfying life that some only dream of fulfilling.

Over the years I've had my share of heat with some people. How insignificant that all seems today. So being reflective, I hold no grudges and I have no ill will toward anyone. Let bygones be bygones …

Well, I suppose there's not much more to say here, except for a line that I once made famous and is now more appropriate than ever.

So long ... from the Sunshine State,

Peace to all,

Gordon

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